

## **How To Train Your Master by AnimeFaeMoon**

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**Summary:**

This is a sequel to Blondies Have More Fun (To Be Or Not To Be A Pet) because so many of you asked for it, so thank you.

**Relationships:** Iason Mink/Riki

**Series:** Blondies Have More Fun [2]

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# Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

Based on the AI No Kusabi novels. I do not own the characters, I am merely borrowing them. CONTAINS GRAPHIC AND MATURE SCENES. DO NOT READ IF THIS OFFENDS YOU!!!

This story will focus on other characters, as well as Riki and Iason, so I hope you will enjoy it. Takes place about three-four months after Riki and Iason return to Tanagura. If you like it, please, please review, and thank you all for your wonderful and continued support

“Ngh!” Riki gripped the arms of his chair in pain as Jupiter entered his mind. Why did it always have to hurt?

*You perceive that it should cause you pain, therefore it does.*

Riki couldn't get used to this...this creature being able to read his thoughts during these sessions. This was his third, and he didn't like it any more than he did the first time, but he had agreed to it because Iason had explained that it was by Jupiter's grace he was alive and whole again.

He could feel himself start to sweat and tried to relax as Iason had shown him, but how could he when it felt like someone using a laser scalpel on his brain?

*Think of something pleasant. A memory or feeling and I will suppress your perceived pain with this.*

Riki didn't like the word suppress, it sounded too much like control. He grit his teeth, shook his head. He may be forced to do this, but he'd be damned if he'd give the AI more control than he absolutely had to. He glared at the hologram Jupiter projected of itself.

*You are very a very stubborn mongrel. You are making this more difficult than it must be.*

“You...sound like I...Iason.”

***You need not speak. I can understand your thoughts.***

“Wh...whatever. Just...can we just get this...over with?”

There was blissful silence in his head and he tried to clear his mind of any thoughts. A machine that could read your mind was unnatural and obscene.

He jolted. “W...what?”

***What is obscene? I understand the literal reference, however not how it applies to myself. Explain.***

Shit! He didn’t dare! It might piss it off.

***Explain.***

“AHHH!” he cried. “Stop that!”

***What is it you wish me to discontinue?***

“It...I don’t like you reading my mind, okay! I can’t even finish a thought before you fu...before you’re demanding an explanation.” Iason had warned him about using profanity in Jupiter’s presence. “I have random thoughts, they don’t always have meanings attached to them, they’re just...random.”

***Why do you have these random thoughts?***

“Oh God.”

***Yes?***

Riki would have rolled his eyes if he’d had the ability. “Obscene means something that isn’t right or natural.” So you’re not right or natural, he finished silently.

*Correct. I am not natural. I was not born in blood from the womb of a female as Humans are. The concepts of right or wrong is a defective human condition. It has caused war, death and disease for centuries. Logic is linear and can be applied to any situation or decision to indicate a proper solution. There is no choice or discussion, there is only the truth.*

“Are we d...done yet?”

*You have still not allowed me proper access, pet.*

“Don’t call me that!”

*Then allow me access.*

“You’re already in my head. What m...more do you want?”

There was a moment of silence, as if Jupiter was considering the question.

Riki allowed himself a small sigh of relief and closed his eyes as the pressure in his brain receded a bit. Why did he have to do this alone? Iason had come in with him the first time, but was apparently advised that Riki had to come on his own for future visits. He wished Iason was here anyway, to lend him moral support at least. Shit! What was he doing wishing for the Blondie? What did he expect Iason to do, hold his fucking hand? He swore at the idea and despised himself for his own weakness.

**Why do you perceive your affection for Iason to be a weakness?**

Jupiter’s voice in his head startled him, the AI had grown so quiet he had almost forgotten it was there.

“What do you mean?”

**You wish Iason to be beside you, yet you are angry that you have this feeling. Explain?**

Riki smirked, if he could explain how he felt about Iason, to anyone, the world’s problems could easily be solved.

**Explain how feelings would solve ecological and social issues?**

God, he couldn't even be sarcastic. "Nothing. Never mind."

**Explain your reasoning for the conflicting emotions I feel in you.**

"It's complicated!" he snapped.

**I understand all. I am the greatest Artificial Intelligence in the universe.**

"You can't even understand random!"

**There is nothing I cannot comprehend with a proper explanation.**

"But you can't comprehend it, that's the point. You know what emotions are, but you can't comprehend them. Isn't that why Iason and I have to play this stupid game with you?"

***Why do you feel anger towards Iason?***

"Because."

***Your reply is unclear. Why do you feel anger towards Iason?***

"I just do."

***Why do you do?***

"Because he kidnapped me, took away my freedom and made me into a fucking pet, okay!"

**You were given a choice of freedom and you chose to stay with Iason. Why did you do this?**

Riki almost laughed at the irony and frustration. "I don't know."

***Do you still wish for freedom?***

“Yes!”s

***Do you wish to leave Iason?***

Riki paused, lowered his eyes as his heart skipped a beat. Finally, grudgingly he replied. “No.”

***I do not understand. You wish for your freedom, yet you remain a captive. Explain.***

“I can’t explain. I...I just...I just want to stay with Iason, okay? I’m still mad about what he did, I still want to be free, but...but I know I can’t be.”

***Can’t? What holds you here?***

Iason held him here. The way he touched him, the way he smelled. Riki depended on Iason now, he hated that but it was true, and his body was addicted to the Blondie. Besides, it didn’t matter where he went, Iason would find him.

***I can make you disappear.***

Riki’s eyes flickered open again, he couldn’t move his body because of the link, but if he’d had the ability, he would have fallen out of the chair. “What...what do you mean?”

***If you truly wish for your freedom, I can give it to you.***

A surge of...excitement? Need? Fear? Something rose inside of him at the idea of getting out of here, away from Tanagura. Away from the pets and the Elites and all the crap he had to deal with.

***You may take some time to reflect later. Now you must allow me to go deeper.***

“What do you mean?” Riki groaned. “I don’t understand what you mean?”

Jupiter’s hologram changed to and a stone cavern seemed too wrap around Riki and caused the stark white room to fade away. A massive iron gate

appeared in front of him, then swung open and Riki could almost feel himself moving forward through the gate, into softer grey walls, only to come up against an even larger stone door.

“What...is this?”

***A simulation that your simple mind can comprehend. You have allowed me through the first gate, so that I am able to read your thoughts, yet there is another, stronger barrier beyond it.***

Riki watched, fascinated despite himself, as the second door started to crack, he could hear the sound of it and shivered as it crumbled and fell away with a loud boom. Inside the grey walls grew into a brilliant white, and sparkled with multi coloured gems.

***This is the place I require; it is called The Sanctum or Inner Eye. A place where I might understand not just your thoughts but also your emotions, your memories and what makes you an individual.***

Naked fear spiked through Riki. “No.” Was it even possible for the AI God to get that kind of access? Wouldn’t such a thing allow it to turn him into a mindless sex doll?

***Iason does this for me, he understands why I request it. His Inner Eye has always been more complex than his brother’s. He has evolved exponentially since meeting you, Riki.***

Hearing it use his name made Riki uncomfortable, but it was better than being called a pet and the voice in his head seemed softer so his pain also lessened.

“Why do you need to be here? What is it you’re looking for?”

***Knowledge. You and Iason have a unique relationship. I wish to understand it further.***

“Why? So you can use it against us later?”

*This is why it would be better to allow me access. Humans are a suspicious lot and the length of time it would take to arrange an explanation simple enough for you to process would be a waste.*

“I’m not an idiot!”

*Correct. Your IQ is well above that grade. Why would you suggest such a title?*

“You just said I was stupid!”

*Incorrect. Explaining that your mind is simple is a logical and true comparison, not a slight. How does this offend you?*

“Would you want to be called stupid or...or simple?”

*Neither term can be applied to me, so would be a falsehood. I am a very complex Artificial Intelligence.*

“But wouldn’t it offend you if someone said it?”

*I do not understand your reference. If you would allow me access, I may glean the meaning of your words more easily.*

Fuck it, Riki thought. He just wanted to get this over with. “Do whatever you want.”

*You must give your permission mentally as well as verbally. I can probe beyond the barrier using force, however I told Iason I would not harm you or cause you undue pain.*

Riki chewed on his lower lip. Will I still be me afterwards? He thought, unable to say the words out loud, for fear hearing them would cause him to change his mind.

*Yes .*

Okay. Do it.



***Close your eyes, Riki.***

Its voice had softened again and Riki felt almost instant relief inside his head. He complied and tried to steady his breathing.

***Think of a good memory. One that you have carried with you for a long time.***

Riki tried, but most of his memories were ones that he would rather forget.

***You have had a hard life.***

Was that...sympathy in its tone? And why did it sound more male now, more human than mechanical? Was that his imagination? Why did the voice sound familiar?

***Let yourself drift, Riki. The memory will come if you relax.***

Riki tried to do as Jupiter asked and a tingling sensation prickled inside his head. A voice, a man's voice. There was something...the scent of...what was that? Chocolate? Was that chocolate? Was he thinking of the cake that Cal used to make him?

***You must go deeper Riki. You are almost there, reach for it.***

Reach for it....Reach for it... A man's laughter, the smell of chocolate, and the delicious feel of a warm sun on his back.

No! No, he didn't want to be here! He couldn't be here!

He felt the moment that Jupiter released the mind sync and he quickly stumbled out of the chair. The cavern faded away and they were in Jupiter's inner quarters. Riki put a hand to his stomach and was having trouble getting off his knees. Was he going to be sick?

"Are you well?"

Hearing Jupiter's voice aloud startled him, but before he could manage a reply the door opened and Iason strode through.

“Why...” he began as Iason gathered him into his arms. “Why are you here?”

“Jupiter called me.” Iason glanced at the hologram of his God. “What happened?”

“He has a significant block that may damage him should I push further. I must contemplate on how to penetrate it.”

“Understood.” Iason caressed Riki’s sweating face. “Let’s go home.”

“Sorry. I...I tried but...sorry.”

“I will call for you when I have found a solution, Riki. Until then, rest and relax. Do not let this trouble you.”

“Yeah. Kay.” He felt so weak, even more than he had from the other sessions, yet they hadn’t even been at it that long.

“I will take care of him. Thank you, Jupiter.”

“You may go.”

Iason and Riki stepped out of the inner chamber, crossed the outside room and then through the door to the main corridor. Riki almost immediately straightened and moved away from Iason.

“Are you feeling better already?”

“I feel fine.” He didn’t, he was shaky and his head was pounding, but he didn’t like to show weakness in public and there were too many people wandering the corridor.

Iason understood his pet well and fell in step behind him. “I will contact Kanin to come and look at you.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Out walking your mongrel, Iason?”

Riki's hand fisted at his side but he remained silent as a tall Blondie stopped before them, with two other elites, a Sapphire and a Ruby. It had been several months since they had returned from the dead, so to speak.

Their return to Eos had been heralded as a sign from Jupiter that Iason was the favored son, even more so when he came out of an audience with their God wearing her colors. But, there were still some people who could not accept their relationship, and some discrete supporters of Orphe that had to be weeded out.

"Careful," Iason replied mildly as he affectionately caressed Riki's hair, then gave a discrete tug to warn Riki to behave. "He bites."

"Then you should put him back on a leash," the Ruby scoffed. "It's offensive to have a mongrel wandering the streets of Eos as he pleases."

"Trust me, I don't want to be here either," Riki growled.

"It is good you are so concerned about the appearance of EOS, Marin. I've been concerned recently about our recycling program and I believe you may be just the person to assist me."

"I don't deal in trash, Iason." The Ruby smirked. "Why not use your pet? I am sure he is used to picking through filth."

Iason felt Riki tense beneath the hand he placed on his shoulder, he squeezed lightly. "Riki's talents lie elsewhere, and he is not familiar with our complicate systems. For example, were you aware that we recycled twenty percent less Thylision this year than we did the previous five years?"

Riki watched, curious as the Ruby's face changed from smug to impassive.

"I was not."

"Nor was I, until I requested a comparison report. However, now that we know, we must find the cause immediately. Thylision is far too dangerous to not have it all accounted for. Don't you agree?"

Marin nodded. "Yes. Of course."

“Good. I shall leave the matter to you then, and I’ll expect a report within two days.”

“I...may require more time to ascertain the problem.”

“I’m sure with your investigative skills you will manage.” He put his hand on Riki’s back and prodded him forward, the Elites stepped out of their way. “Two days, Marin. Do not disappoint me.”

Riki waited until they had reached the main landing before speaking. “He’s selling it, isn’t he?”

Iason nodded, stopped at a drink cart and ordered two Sparking Tropical’s. “He is.” He handed one of the drinks to Riki before they moved on. “And now that he knows I know, he will need to find a way to replace his stock within the next twenty-four hours.”

“Or, he could just some random Human to use as a scapegoat, and you’ll have to kill the poor bastard for something he didn’t do.”

“Ah, that is a possibility, however as Humans only process the regular recyclables and waste, they have no direct contact with the Thylision stocks, so to accuse a human would first mean that an Elite allowed a Human in a place he was forbidden. Such a revelation would cause an Elite to lose their position, which is akin to being shunned from any future high-ranking offices.”

“And Merin is in charge of the Thylision?”

“No, Sojar is, however they are very close and so I am sure that Merin would not wish Sojar to be affected by this either. They are both involved in selling the Thylison on the black market.”

“How long have you known?”

“I have always known. Katze keeps me well informed on what products are requested and sold and as you know, I have my hand in...how would you

say...many pies. There are always backdoor dealings that go against Jupiter's rules, but most turn a blind eye."

"Okay," Riki sipped his drink. "So. If you already knew about this, and it seems no one else really cares about it either, why bother bringing it up now?"

"First, one must always keep their hand hidden, until it is the proper time to show their cards."

"What if the other person calls your bluff?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "I never bluff, Riki."

"Okay, what was the other reason?"

"Other reason?"

"You said first, so there must be a second reason at least you were getting to?"

"Ah, of course." Iason looked down at Riki with a cold, dangerous look. "Because he insulted you."

Riki forced himself not to shiver and suddenly felt a very tiny sliver of sympathy for the Ruby.

"At any rate," Iason said as they continued to walk. "The only real choice is to replace the stock. Then he can claim that there was an error in the record and that he magically found the extra Thylison."

Riki smirked, he knew how much Thylision could go for on the black market. "It's gonna cost him, big time."

"It will, and it will also make it more difficult for him and Sojar to continue their endeavors, as he is aware I shall be watching the count more closely now."

"What if he can't replenish it on time?"

They entered Iason's building. "He will. I'll make sure that he can get his hands on the amount he needs." They stepped into the lift and Riki pressed their floor.

"Wait. Hold on. Where are you going to get the Thylission?"

Iason simply stared at him.

"You...you're a buyer? You're gonna force him to restock the Thylission he illegally sold, by selling him back the same Thylission you bought from him on the black market?"

"Yes, for a significant profit, of course."

"But...Does he know he was selling to you?"

"Of course not, that is why I employ people like Katze."

"But..." Riki scratched his head as they stepped into Iason's condo. "Then, you're just as guilty as he is!"

"One is only guilty if they get caught, Riki."

Riki gaped at him as their new Furniture, a boy named simply Bean, appeared to take his jacket and Iason's cloak.

"Shall I begin dinner, Sir?"

"No, just wine."

"Yes, Sir." The boy disappeared as Riki continued to stare at Iason.

"Does your head still hurt, pet?"

"Huh?" Riki lifted his hand to his head, forgot he was holding the drink container and winced as it conked off his skull. "Ow."

Iason took the bottle and bent to kiss the impacted area. "You are still not yourself, are you? Would you like to take a nap, or a bath?"

Riki was tired. “A nap sounds good.” He stepped down into the living room and started across, then turned back to Iason. “Are you coming?”

Smiling at the invite, Iason quickly followed. Riki seemed more comfortable with their relationship now. He still had his tantrums of course, but for the most part he was accepting of the fact that they needed each other.

## Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki is still feeling the effects of Jupiter's Mind-Meld.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to those that commented, I am glad you enjoyed it. Please keep the reviews coming! :-)

Riki's headache had not dissipated, even after his 'nap' with Iason. It wasn't overly painful, just a dull nagging throb at the back of his head that was making him irritable. Iason had gone into his office to do some work and so Riki found himself watching the screen and trying to find something of interest to watch.

Finally, he tossed the remote aside and picked up the book he had been reading earlier, but the pounding in his head prevented him from concentrating on the story, and he gave up after just a few minutes.

"Do you need anything, Sir?"

Riki didn't even look at Bean, their new furniture. "No."

"Are you unwell?"

Riki glared at him.

"Master Iason will be bothered if you are unwell. Please state the nature of your trouble and I will assist you."

"Fuck. Off." God this kid was irritating.

Riki missed Cal and really didn't like this kid, at all. Their new Furniture seemed intent on carrying out Iason's orders to the letter. He apparently had memorized the Pet Ordinance Codes and often quoted them, which irritated Riki even more. There was no bending of the rules, as he had managed with



Cal, and there was no sympathy to his plight like what he had gotten from Darryl.

He shudder suddenly. He always had mixed feelings when he thought about Darryl. He had appreciated the fact that the Furniture had forfeited his life by opening the doors of Eos and setting him free, or tried too, but he had never managed to purge himself of that conditioned response that Iason had created. Iason had often threatened him with calling Darryl into the room. The boy would often be asked to perform oral sex on him and Riki and as much as Riki hated it, he hated more that it brought back memories of what he'd had to do to survive in the Slums, which inevitably brought more shame.

Iason didn't understand how he could feel shame, but he did. It was because he felt shame that he could also feel pride, but the cost of that pride...He shook his head. He'd done what he'd had to do to survive and he would never allow anyone else to think less of him because it, but...he still felt shame and it was the main cause of his anger; most of the time.

"Judging by the dilatation of your pupils you are suffering from a headache. I will bring you medication for it."

"Do you not understand the concept of fu..." Riki began but Bean had already disappeared. "Little prick."

He rose and stepped up into the main floor, then out onto the balcony.

He wanted a smoke but that little shit had hidden his cigarettes and so he had to ask the Furniture whenever he wanted one. Bean kept the limit strictly to four a day. He'd considered telling Iason, but he wasn't a rat. He'd find a way to deal with Bean on his own, just as he always dealt with things on his own. He didn't need Iason to take care of things for him.

He took a deep breath, stared out at the city and wondered, not for the first time, what his life would be if he hadn't followed Iason that day. He'd probably still be living in Ceres, or working for Katze maybe, running shipments and the like. To be honest, neither option held much appeal for him anymore.

Iason had been working hard to undo all the damage that Orphe had done in Eos, and it had not been easy. There were nights that the Blondie had not come home, and other nights when he did and seemed so exhausted that Riki didn't have the heart to give him even a moment of trouble. Instead, he lead Iason to bed and let the Elite do whatever he wanted, which sometimes was just to sleep with Riki in his arms.

Iason was still trying to overturn the rule about Furniture being destroyed after a certain age, and so Cal had remained with Katze. Riki found that he missed Cal much more than he thought he would, but Iason informed him that he had given Cal permission to work with Katze and last they heard Cal was doing well in his new role.

Life in Eos also wasn't as bad as it had once been. Apparently, the story of their resurrection had taken on a life of its own. The idea of a pet walking through flames to save the life his master was cause enough to make Riki a bit of a legend. There was far more to the story of course, and no one truly knew what had occurred, beyond the fact that Riki had risked his life for his master and that they had both survived the tragedy.

No one else knew of Iason's previous physical impairment, of Jupiter's involvement, or that Orphe had been driven to madness and had tried to kill them. Thanks to Raoul and his people, everyone believed that the radical Blondie who had kidnapped Riki, and tried to kill Iason, had simply died in a tragic but unforeseeable shuttle accident.

Life here still wasn't great, but it was a little easier. Instead of the hate, prejudice and jealousy, Riki had always faced, he now actually had a few people who admired him, some even tried to be his friend. He wasn't that naive. People, especially pets, could change their minds in a heartbeat. He wasn't about to put himself in a position where he or Iason could be exposed, and he still didn't really care for the other pets, who were so submissive to their masters.

The Blondie had kept his word and no longer treated him as a pet when they were at home, and Riki really did appreciate the subtle change. It was a slow evolution, Iason was still an Elite and some things would never change

in the way he perceived things, but things were better and Riki felt more comfortable with his situation than he had previously.

The cock ring had never been replaced, instead Riki wore the ring on his finger that Iason had given him when he finally woke up after the battle with Orphe, and Iason wore the matching ring on his own hand, but it was always hidden by his gloves when he was outside the apartment. Riki didn't really mind and he wasn't stupid, he knew his contained a tracker. He'd chosen not to get upset over that because he understood that it was not for Iason to keep tabs on him, but for his own protection. The situation with Orphe had shown him how vulnerable he was as Iason's pet, and Orphe still had friends here in Eos.

Suddenly he wanted something more than a smoke, he wanted another kind of distraction, but wanting *that*, as always brought a feeling of nervousness and shame. He rubbed his stomach, then gathered his courage and stepped down from the balcony.

"I have brought your medication, Sir."

Riki briefly wondered if a Furniture was thrown off a building in Eos and no one was around to hear it, did it make a sound?

Bean held out the two blue pills and a glass of water, expectantly, and when Riki ignored him and moved past, the boy followed. "You must take the medication, Sir. The Master will be angry if your ailments are not properly dealt with.

"I told you that I'm fine."

"Yes, but you are lying, and so I encourage you to take the medication."

Riki spun around to face him. He wasn't a tall man, but he was bigger than this kid and a whole lot stronger. "Make me."

"I would prefer not to do that, Sir. Please take your medication."

Riki crossed his arms in front of his chest and tried to ignore the increased throbbing in his skull. “No.” Come on, he thought, try something you little punk. He was itching for a fight and he didn’t even understand why.

“If you insist.” Bean transferred the pills to his pocket and pulled out a wand. “Pets must be disciplined whenever their actions cause harm to themselves or others. Your refusal to take your medication requires that I make sure you take it by any means necessary.”

“You use that on me and it will be the last thing you ever do.”

“It is my duty, Sir. Will you take your medication?”

“Fuck. You.”

“Very well.” Bean raised the wand and Riki buried his instinct to run and stood his ground.

“Bean!”

Both turned towards Iason as he crossed the living room.

“Apologies for the disturbance, Master. The pet refuses to take medication that will cure his headache. He leaves me no choice but to follow the code of procedure as it is stated in section three...”

“Stop.” Iason lifted a hand and Bean fell silent as Iason reached them and held out his hand. “Give me the medication.” The Furniture complied and Iason turned and offered the pills to Riki. “Take them.”

Appalled and hurt that Iason would side with Bean he held Iason’s gaze and growled out a refusal. Would Iason really allow the kid to use a wand on him? What the hell happened to not treating him like a pet?

“You are obviously irritable and I can see in your eyes that you have a headache. Now take the medication.”

Having Bean’s words repeated by Iason infuriated Riki as the throbbing in the back of his head became a full-fledged migraine. “When did either of

you get your fucking medical license! I said I'm fine and I'm fucking fine!"

"Riki."

Riki recognized that specific warning tone, although he hadn't heard it in quite a while, and his training had him reaching for the pills before he'd even realized it. He curled his hand into a fist, as he realized what he was doing and rage filled him.

Iason's eyebrow rose at Riki's sudden defiance and the death glare the mongrel shot at him. "Is there a problem?"

"You're the fucking problem!"

"Don't speak to me that way, Riki. I have told you this before..."

"Yeah, yeah! You told me! You bark and I respond, whether I want to or not! Will you can take that shit and shove it up Bean's ass!"

Filled with hurt and fury, Riki turned on his heel and strode across the room. He didn't even get to the front door before Iason had gripped his arm.

"Where are you going?"

"Out!" Riki rounded on him and tried to shrug him off. "Or are you gonna order me to stay here, maybe chain me to the bed again and torture me?"

Iason's gaze narrowed. Why was Riki speaking of such things? Had they not moved beyond all of that? "I want you to stay here, Riki. If something has upset you then tell me what it is..."

"You upset me! This place upsets me! The F-ing sons of Jupiter upset me, alright!"

"Riki..."

"Let me go!"

“No. We must talk about this. Was your session with Jupiter too difficult? I know that it can be invasive and uncomfortable but...”

“The problem isn’t Jupiter it’s you!” Riki shoved with all his might against Iason’s chest and actually managed to move the Blondie. “Just leave me alone!”

Stunned, Iason released Riki and watched his pet bolt through the door. What in the name of Jupiter had caused such a reaction?

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Iason checked the readout of his wristwatch for the tenth time in the last hour and saw that the little blue dot was still stationary. Riki had been in the Arboretum for the last two hours, before that he had gone to a pet market and before that he had just been wandering the halls of Eos. In total, he had been gone six hours already and Iason was starting to worry.

He was trying very hard not to make Riki feel like a pet, or feel trapped or too limited. He’d allowed Riki the freedom to leave Eos, but he had to stay in the city limits of Tanagura. Riki despised this city so hadn’t, as yet, taken advantage of his new boundaries.

Still, he couldn’t have Riki wandering about at all hours of the night, especially since Orphe still had supporters among their people. He’d given Riki enough time to sulk about whatever he was upset about, but it was time to come home.

Calling security to apprehend him would anger Riki, and Riki would just ignore their new Furniture, if he tried sending Bean, so that meant he would have to go himself. Honestly, sometimes he wondered if Riki was really worth all this hassle.

“Are you going out, Master?”

“Yes. I shall be back shortly.” He accepted his cloak from the young boy, who looked nothing like Cal, with his dull brown hair and eyes and pale, expressionless face.

Katze had been a marvelous Furniture and had shown so much promise with his negotiating skills and head for business that Iason had set him up to work for him outside of the house. Cal had been become very adept at dealing with Riki and uncanny in his ability to predict one’s needs. Darryl also had great skills, and it was regretful that his choices had led to his demise.

However, this boy showed no promise outside the simple purpose of Furniture. There was not a single interesting thing about him, in fact he bordered on being horrifically boring and predictable. Ah well, they had needed a furniture and so he’d purchased this one, but once he overturned that ridiculous law of Orphe’s, they’d get Cal back and things would go back to the way they should be again.

Iason left his condo, took the lifts down to the main square and headed for Riki’s position. When he entered the exotic smell of flowers and greenery tickled his senses, it was rare to have such a place on Amoi, as plant life did not grow here naturally. Only in well maintained preserves like this could you find such foliage, and all of the plants and flowers in here were imported from another planet. He knew it was one of Riki’s sanctuaries.

“Riki?”

“I know you are in here, please don’t make me wander around looking for you. I am very tired and it is time to come home.”

Again, his words went unanswered. With a sigh, he strode down the stone path, turned left, then right and spotted a form behind one of the brick barriers and beneath a small tree.

“Oh, Riki.” He regarded the six-pack of empty bottles, crouched and pulled Riki’s hair away from his face. The boy was fast asleep. “Why do you do such things, my love?”

He picked up the bottles, tossed them in a recycling unit then returned and pulled Riki into his arms. Luckily, it was late at night, so there was almost no one around to question why he was carrying his pet back to his condo.

Riki did not stir in his arms, even as he stepped through the doors of their bedroom and set Riki on their bed.

Bean appeared. "Shall I undress the pet for you, Sir?"

Iason tried not to sigh, Riki was correct, this boy was annoying. However, they had to have him around, at least for the time being. "No I will see to it." Riki hated to rely on Furniture for such things, he wouldn't even allow Cal to undress him unless he had no other choice and besides, Iason had found he rather enjoyed doing it the few times he had the chance to. "You may go to bed."

Riki woke up as Iason was sliding the sheets up around the both of them, and tried to turn away.

"Stop," Iason ordered and pulled Riki back against his chest. "Why are you being like this?"

"My head hurts," Riki moaned and Iason struggled not to roll his eyes.

"Then why didn't you take the medication when Bean offered it?"

"I didn't need it!" Riki again struggled to get away, but was unable to break Iason's vice grip. "Let me go."

"No. Why did you run away like that?"

Riki gave up and slumped in Iason's arms. "Why did you take his side?"

Iason blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You took his side! You..." Iason had embarrassed him by supporting the Furniture's insistence on the medication, and then he had used that scolding tone. In the blink of an eye everything they had decided, all the little changes in their relationship had vanished and he was a worthless piece of



shit again. "I'm not a pet," he muttered, glad he was faced away from Iason so that the Blondie wouldn't see the flush in his cheeks.

"Riki." Iason loosened his grip, but only to adjust them so he could catch Riki's chin and force the mongrel to meet his gaze. When he saw the pain and betrayal in Riki's eyes he felt his system flutter and stall for at least two seconds. "I've...hurt you?" he asked surprised. "How did I do this?"

Riki pulled his face out of Iason's grip and hid his face in the pillow. "You took his side."

"I don't understand what you mean by that. You're angry because I asked you to take the medication?"

"No," he mumbled. "Yes."

"Which is it?"

Riki lifted his head and hesitantly looked at the perplexed Blondie. "He was gonna use a wand on me. Would you have let him?"

"No."

"He has the right to do it. He..." Riki looked down at his fingers gripping the pillow beneath him, hating the uncertainty that was crawling through him, but the alcohol had loosened his tongue. "He's a Furniture and he has the right..."

"No one has the right to touch you but me, Riki, for discipline or otherwise."

Riki sat up suddenly. "Then why didn't you tell him that? Why did you take his side and tell me to take the fucking medication instead of punishing him for threatening to use a wand on me?"

Iason blinked as he considered and searched for the required response. "You had a headache. The medication would have made you feel better."

Riki growled in frustration and slid out of the bed, pulled on his jeans. “Fine. Why don’t you ask him to fuck with you then?”

Iason regarded him quietly, trying to understand what why his words had made Riki angry again. “It is a Furniture’s job to take care of things, including the health of a pet...” Iason began and realized his mistake when Riki glared at him, grabbed his shirt and stalked towards the door. As an Elite, Iason’s reflexes and speed were incredibly swift and his hand was against the door before Riki could try to open it. “Stay.”

Riki remained facing the door. “Is that another order?”

Iason opened his mouth to respond, then recalculated. Somehow, he was only upsetting Riki more by speaking, so he turned the mongrel and captured his lips instead. Riki allowed the kiss but did not respond to it and kept his eyes wide open to glare at Iason.

“What would you have me do?” he asked, releasing Riki. “Would you prefer that I had taken the wand and used it on Bean? Should I have him beaten within an inch of his life, or set for termination because he tried to carry out his purpose?”

Riki lowered his eyes as that damned feeling of shame wormed its way into his gut again. No, he didn’t want Bean hurt, or terminated, he just wanted him gone. “I miss Cal.”

Iason sighed and pulled Riki into his arms. “As so I. I am doing all that I can to bring him home soon, Riki.”

Riki gave into his instinct and slid his arms around Iason. “I know. I know you’re trying.”

“I’ve asked so much of you, bringing you back to a place you hate, forcing you to remain as a pet while you are here, but it will not be forever.” Iason caught his chin again, lifted it so he could look into those dark, obsidian depths. “I have enjoyed the time we have had together since returning to Eos. Do you not find it better? Are you not at least a little bit more satisfied with the changes we have made?”

Riki nodded, he was mostly and he understood that Iason had no control over what other's thought or felt. "It just...it pissed me off, you...you doing that and then..." Then using that damn tone with him, as if he was an unruly pet again.

"Then?"

Riki shrugged it off, there was no point bringing it up. Iason might not have even been aware he had done it. "My head really hurts."

"I imagine six bottles of Rissi did not help it."

Riki smirked. "Not really no."

Iason bent and kissed Riki's forehead. "I will ring for Bean to..."

"No!" Riki reached for Iason's arm as he turned away. "Just tell me where it is, I'll get it myself."

Stubborn, rebellious, obstinate, Iason thought affectionately. "I have no idea where he keeps it, but come," he took Riki's hand and led him back to the bed. "I have something else that might work."

"Is sex *all* you think about?"

"No, it isn't. I think of multiple things and multiple times, the advantages if having a positronic brain."

"Show off," Riki smirked as he crawled back into bed and let himself be seated and pulled against Iason's chest. He felt the soft vibration of the Blondie's chuckle, then the light pressure of fingertips at his temples.

"Close your eyes, love."

"Kay." Riki complied as Iason began to massage away his pain. He felt himself relax into it and just when the throbbing was almost gone, he murmured. "I was coming to find you."

"When?"

“Before the thing with Bean.” Riki hummed and relaxed further against Iason as his fingers unconsciously found a few strands of Iason’s hair to play with.

“Why?”

“Dunno. I...wanted to be with you.”

Iason’s fingers paused in surprise and his eyes widened. Did that mean that Riki had missed him? Riki had never sought him out before or admitted to wanting to be with him. Iason was disappointed and a little angry that Bean had ruined the opportunity, but he chose not to dwell on it.

“Do you still?” he asked, startled to find a hint of trepidation in his voice.

“Hmmm?” Riki had started to drift. “What?”

“Do you still want to be with me now, Riki?” Iason was unaware that his entire system had paused as he waited for Riki’s reply.

“Mmmhmmm. Always,” Riki murmured sleepily, then turned and curled into Iason. “Tired.”

“Yes.” Thrilled, and suddenly desperate to have Riki, Iason tried to push back his desire as they both slid lower in the bed. “How tired?”

Riki lazily opened one eye. “Not *that* tired.”

Iason smiled and lowered head to claim Riki’s mouth.

## Chapter 3

### Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is settling into his new life

Guy removed the pan of fried vegetables from the burner as he heard the front door chime, signaling that his employer was home. Using his only hand, he quickly shook the vegetables onto the two plates already on the table, which held sizzling meat and rice, then set the pan down and shut off the stove.

"Welcome home," he offered as a tall Onyx entered the kitchen.

Unlike Mink, the one Elite Guy knew, who always wore his long hair down over his shoulders, Shiao chose to wear his in a single braid down his back. He also wore less ostentatious clothing than most of Jupiter's children, although Guy had no doubt it still cost dear. Most surprisingly, Shiao only wore gloves when he drove.

"Well now, you've been busy." Shiao pulled off his long leather raglan, draped it over the back of a chair and settled at the table.

He used to employ a Furniture for such things as cooking and general housework, but since Guy had become his companion, it seemed a waste to keep both. Guy seemed to like cooking, although a mongrel could not create the kind of superb dishes that a Furniture was trained to, he found he was enjoying the more simplistic fare that Guy managed. One thing that seemed to inspire enthusiasm in his companion was the array of real and natural ingredients now at his fingertips.

He furnished Guy with a prosthetic, as promised, and had even offered to pay for a new arm to be generated, but Guy had refused. He used the prosthetic when they went out, but at home, he did not bother with it.

Shiao sensed some sort of self-punishment was behind Guy's decision, but he did not press the matter. As long as Guy did his job as a companion,

Shiao was not interested in his past. However, it had been almost six months now and he had hoped the young man would have lost some of that inner sadness that seemed to plague him.

"It isn't like I have much else to do," Guy replied, then turned his head, ashamed at his own bitterness.

Shiao had offered him a place to stay and a job after the fiasco with Orphe. He should have been grateful for the opportunity to get away from Amoï and try to start fresh. And he was grateful, the Onyx has really saved his ass, not once but twice. He would never forget the debt owed to him.

Shiao hadn't blinked when Guy had asked him to stop calling him Dale, which was the name he had decided on after the redhead had his memory erased. Once he regained his identity, he'd confided to Shiao his real name, and the Elite didn't ask him any questions or make a big deal, just asked which name Guy preferred.

Shiao made good money and in turn paid Guy a very good wage, for the little he did, far more money than Guy would ever thought he would see in two life times. They lived in a very nice apartment just outside a bustling city on a planet called Zandere. He was free to come and go as he pleased as long as he was home when Shiao returned so they could spend time together; after all that was his job. They played games or watched programs, or sometimes just sat and Guy would read aloud. Shiao was more than capable of reading, but claimed he liked the sound of Guy's voice.

Guy was not a pet, not like Riki. Shiao did not own him, he was paid a salary. It was a job and there was nothing sexual about their relationship. He had no master, not now, not ever, but still he ached at the idea that Riki had chosen to subject himself to such a shameful and lowly life.

Being a Mongrel was bad enough, at least according to others, but being a pet... That was the lowest of low and yet Riki chose first to return to his master, then to die with him. Then, with Orphe, Riki had actually fought to save Iason, and Guy couldn't understand why. Was life as a pet that good or was Iason Mink's brainwashing really that unbreakable? Guy still couldn't wrap his head around it.

Did Riki perceive he owed some kind of unimaginable level of debt to Mink? He was always adamant about paying his debts, and Guy had learned to be as well, but Riki's reasoning seemed too extreme. No matter what the debt, why would he allow himself to be controlled and kept like a dog?

Guy could not deny that he felt obligated to Shiao, but he would never humiliate himself or consider the Onyx his master because of it. He never really went anywhere, other than to run errands or to purchase groceries, and that was because it was his job and not to enjoy himself. Shiao did not pressure him to do things he didn't want to and he never claimed to own him.

His old gang in Ceres probably thought he was dead, Riki probably hoped he was. No one here knew he was a mongrel from Ceres, so when he did go out he was treated with a level of respect that he was still trying to adjust too. Still, in the time he had been here, he had made no friends and still only spent time with Shiao.

Sometimes, Shiao returned to Amoï, and it took everything Guy had not to accept his employer's offer to accompany him. He couldn't risk running into that redhead again, or worse, Iason Mink. He'd been given a free pass twice now, but he knew he would not receive a third reprieve. If he was truly honest, he couldn't trust himself not to try and contact Riki if he was on planet; despite the fact that Riki warned he never wanted to see him again.

"It smells delicious." Shiao said taking a bite as Guy finally settled opposite him, but the other man only picked at his food. "No point letting a good meal go to waste."

Guy nodded and slid a piece of meat into his mouth, real meat, not the meat substitute he'd been raised on in Ceres. The food on this planet was lush and exotic, and tasted amazing, even with his meager skills at cooking. When he realized that much of the fruit and vegetables from Zandere were shipped to Amoï he couldn't help but wonder was this also the kind of food that Riki was eating?

Had it been the lavish lifestyle and abundance of great food that had changed his friend? Guy couldn't deny having something other than generic

food packs, once or twice a day, chased by bad whisky could certainly turn a man's head. So could having a warm bed, actual hot water for a shower and a solid roof over your head that you didn't have to nearly sell your soul for, but he'd thought Riki was better than that. He'd believed Riki was above such things.

The comfort of living with Shiao was certainly undeniable, but Shiao had never tried to intimately touch him. He wasn't a pet and Riki was. Riki had chosen to be a pet and Guy didn't comprehend how someone as proud as Riki could bear it. He didn't have a tenth of Riki's pride and yet his short time spent being a bath boy had made him feel dirty and cheap, even before his memories had returned.

Maybe if he could understand what kind of hold Iason Mink had over Riki, what had turned his friend and lover from a proud rebel to an obedient dog....No. He didn't think he would ever understand it. Iason must have tortured Riki, must have done unspeakable things to him and Riki was too ashamed or too conditioned now to leave the Blondie. That had to be it. What else could it be?

"Guy?"

Guy glanced up, saw that Shiao had finished and had already risen and set his plate in the cleaning dispenser.

"I'd like to take a bath."

"Okay." Guy shovelled the rest of his food into his mouth, because growing up on the streets of Ceres had taught him not to waste what was given to him, even if he didn't feel like eating. "I'll be right in."

Shiao nodded and stepped down into their living area to head upstairs. "Bring some wine would you, the number four Pachio."

"Okay."

Guy put his plate in the cleaner, as well as the dishes he used to cook with and pressed the button to run the cycle. He wiped his hand on a dishtowel



then pulled at the snaps of his shirt. Most of his clothes were adorned with simple fasteners now so that he could easily open them with a quick tug. Getting a T-shirt on one handed was a struggle, so he had stopped wearing them.

Remembering the wine, he opened the cabinet to the wine cellar, stepped down, and selected the right vintage. Returning to the kitchen area, he tapped a button under the sink and a small cart robot slid out from a side cupboard.

“Support tray,” he instructed and the robot pulled two of its stubby arms together and flattened them into a solid surface over its head.

Guy set the bottle and two wine glasses on the tray and stepped down into the living area. “Follow.”

They entered the large, luxurious washroom and Guy filled the two wine glasses and set them on a shelf over the massive bath. He ordered the robot to rest in the corner then turned to the wall panel and set the dual faucets to run. Adjusting the temperature to what Shiao preferred, he programmed some soothing aromatic bath salts, then finished taking off his shirt just as the Onyx entered wearing a long robe.

Shiao clipped his braid atop his head, then allowed Guy to remove his robe and stepped into the bath, lowering himself with a long sigh. “Ah, this is better.”

Guy shucked his jeans, having long ago gotten over being naked in front of someone else because of working in a bathhouse, then stepped in behind Shiao and picked up the body sponge. He pressed a button on the dispenser on the wall and slid the sponge under it until it was well layered with the fragrant soap.

“Still having trouble with that shipper?” he asked, knowing that Shiao liked conversations while bathing.

“Dealing with Foh is tedious. If I thought I could get the product from anyone else I would do so and have the rodent exterminated.”

Guy smirked as he started to wash Shiao's chest. "And start a war with his three million children?"

"I don't believe he has that many, perhaps just over a million." Shiao smiled and lifted his arms so Guy could continue the service. "It's a shame they are the only race that can properly milk the Thadus Roots."

"Hmmm. Turn please." Shiao obediently turned so that Guy could reach his back. "You're an Elite, couldn't you just make a machine to do it?"

"The roots are too delicate, they would never get through a machine, no matter how well made it was, and they are too prickly for humans to milk, even with proper gloves." Shiao sighed again and leaned back against Guy's chest. "Unfortunately because Foh uses his family for the work, the cost of employing that many people, or building so many machines to replace them simply isn't cost effective."

"What about making the roots into a paste?"

Shiao sat up and turned. "A paste?"

"Sure. You use the milk to make thread for Arusan Silk, right?"

"Yes."

"We never had real milk in Ceres, we had milk paste, but if we boiled it into liquid and froze it, we could make it last longer. Kind of like a milk sickle."

Shiao stared at him, then slowly took the sponge from Guy and indicated he should turn around. "I see, however if we grind the whole root we risk contaminating it with the poisonous thorns."

Guy turned his back to his employer and felt the sponge slide across his back. This was something that Shiao liked to do, wash each other, and he didn't mind it. It never became intimate. "Does the milk come from the thorns?"

"No, it's inside the root."

“So freeze the root, use a cutter to shave off the thorns, which should be brittle when cold, then squash the root into paste.”

Shiao dropped the sponge. “That is an ingenious idea.”

Guy shrugged and pulled the sponge out of the water to add more soap, then nudged Shiao’s leg to have him raise it. “Even if it doesn’t work, you could threaten Foh with it and maybe he would be more reasonable. If he even thinks you might have another way of milking the root he’ll want to hold onto his contract.”

Before Guy knew what was happening, Shiao had grabbed his face and planted a full kiss on his lips. “You are a genius!” He rose and grabbed the robe off the wall hook. “I have to call my team and see if this can be done, what it might cost and the effectiveness of the...”

Shiao continued to talk to himself as he walked out and Guy stared after him, aghast. He put his fingers to his lips and found they trembled. No one had kissed him since Riki. He’d allowed men in the bathhouse to fuck him, but that was just a job and he had felt nothing. Shiao had never made any sort of move on him, sexually, and he couldn’t even say that the kiss had been intended as anything more than Shiao’s excitement and yet...yet...

He glanced down at his reaction and felt his face heat with shame. *What* the hell was that?

## Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

Just another day in Eos.

Riki walked with purpose through the marketplace of Eos, heading for his usual place in the Botanical Gardens, aware of every stare that came his way, yet firmly ignoring them. Some things never changed, he still garnered unwanted attention whenever he left the condo, but now not all the stares were filled with hatred or disgust.

He usually avoided this area because it was often filled with pets out shopping with their Masters, or just on their own, but there was construction in the main courtyard and so he'd had to detour through here. A fierce glare was delivered to the boys who tried to make eye contact, and he deliberately avoided meeting the gaze of any females. Even after all this time, his lesson with Mimea had not been forgotten.

"You're Riki, aren't you? Master Iason's pet?"

Riki didn't even bother to look at the young pet running after him. The kid had enough gold on him to start his own stall, but was dressed in the usual revealing pet attire. Riki didn't bother to acknowledge him and kept walking.

"Wait, I want to talk to you."

Riki sidestepped the kid easily when he tried to step in front of his path, and continued walking.

"Why are you such and asshole?" the boy called out, giving up.

Because he had to be, Riki thought grimly, but he wouldn't quicken his stride. He wouldn't run away, but nor did he intend to stay and chat with anyone. He'd given up the idea of making any friends here, there would be no new gang like he had in Ceres.

A spike of misery shot through him, but he pushed it back. He didn't need friends or a gang or any of that anymore. He had Iason, and that had to be enough, didn't it? What other choice was there? If he ever was stupid enough to make friends with someone, Iason's jealousy would wind up getting that person hurt.

"OW! Please, stop!"

Riki glanced towards one of the dim maintenance areas between a couple of stalls and saw two older, pets, one with pale brown hair the other blonde, were roughing up a much smaller one. His hands curled into fists and he continued walking. Wasn't his problem. He wouldn't get involved.

"You broke it!" the Blond insisted slapping the younger pet again. "My Master gave me this! Do you know what he'll do when he sees it's ruined?"

"I...I didn't mean it! I...I never..."

He slapped the kid again. "Why can't you watch where you're going? Stupid!"

"What do you expect from an In-Bred?" the Brunette scoffed, looking bored. "They're as stupid as they are ugly."

"I...I'll pay for it. I'll ask my master and he'll..."

"I don't want your master's money," the Blond sneered grabbing the kid up by the collar and shaking him. "You have to pay for it!"

The boy's eyes grew wide. "I...but I don't have any money!"

"Then you'll have to make it up to us." The Blond sneered again, and knocked the kid down. "My shoes are dirty. Clean them."

The young pet glanced up confused, then started using his hands to wipe at the shoes.

"Not with your hands. Lick them clean, In-Bred."

The boy's eyes filled with tears, but having no other choice, he started to lower his mouth to the older boy's shoes.

"You plan on having him lick your filthy dick too?"

The boy lifted his head, startled as the two older one's turned to look behind them and spotted the, dark haired mongrel leaning casually against the wall of the alcove, his arms crossed over his chest. As relaxed as Riki appeared, dangerous waves emitted from the dark eyes that held them all in place.

"Mind your own business!" The Blond snapped, then glared at his friend who was tugging on his arm.

"That's *Riki*," The Brunette muttered. "Iason Mink's pet."

Riki had the pleasure of watching the bully pale as he pushed off the wall, and strolled towards them. "Is this how you kids entertain yourselves these days, by beating up pets that are prettier than you?"

Both older pets flushed while the kid they had been bullying remained on his knees, staring up at Riki in awe.

"This isn't your business," The Blond insisted, trying to maintain some of his dignity and authority.

"You're right, and I really wanted to stay out of it." Riki shrugged as if there was no helping it. "But you had to go and be stupid."

Hearing the asshole pet demand the younger boy lick his shoes brought back the memory of when Iason had demanded the same thing from him, after his gang Bison had tracked him down the second time he had left Ceres. Iason had needed to prove that Riki belonged to him, and it had been the most humiliating incident of all that had been done. He seen the disgust and disappointment in his friend's eyes at how far he had fallen and knew he could never go back to being their friend and leader.

Having promised Iason to stay out of trouble, and knowing that getting physical with someone else's pet would also cause issues, he hoped these

idiots were smart enough to let it go and allow the boy to walk away. If they didn't, well, he'd do what he had to do.

"He broke my bracelet!" The Blond insisted, struggling to defend himself and his actions, but obviously uneasy about going up against the legendary dark skinned pet.

"Boo hoo." Riki reached into his pocket for the credit stick Iason had given him a while ago, so he could purchase whatever he felt like buying. So far, he had only used it to buy alcohol and cigarettes so he wouldn't have to ask Bean for them. "You have one of these right?"

The pet nodded slowly and pulled out his stick. Riki programed an amount and touched his credit stick to the end of the other's.

"That should be enough to buy you some more junk, now get the fuck outta here."

The two older pets didn't have to be told twice and they hurried away. Riki glared at the kid still kneeling on the ground. "You gonna sit there all day?"

The boy rose, but kept his head lowered. "I...I have nothing to repay you with, but if you wait I will ask my master...."

"How much trouble will you get in when you tell your master you broke another pet's property?"

The boy flushed as a spark of fear flickered across his face. "That is my problem. I will return your money to you."

Riki shrugged. "It's not my money, so forget about it. And don't be such a pussy next time."

The kid's head shot up. "Excuse me?"

Riki had to admit, the boy *was* gorgeous. His hair was a pale silver that seemed to shimmer as it moved and he had the most beautiful violet eyes half hidden behind ridiculously long silver lashes. "You're Unicyn." The name the other pets had called him made sense now.

Riki recalled reading about the Unicyn in school. They were a Xenophobic race that had once been on the cusp of extinction and in an desperate attempt to propagate their species began a habit of inbreeding. It had become natural for sisters and brothers to marry each other and have children, or for a father or mother to have sex with their children once they became of age. Despite the obviously lax morals of Amoï, incest was still frowned upon.

Unicyn were recognized by their blue or silver hair and violet or gold eyes, and while Riki had seen data slide pictures, he had never met one before. As far as the Unicyn didn't leave their home planet except for trade business, and they were very selective on who they did business with.

The boy nodded. "Y...yes."

"What the hell are you doin' here as a pet?"

"My family owed a debt, I was given to a Ruby of Tanagura as payment as he expressed interest in me."

Riki blinked, his own family sold him? That was cold, but to be from Xenophobic atop that and forced to live among other races, the kid had to be scared out of his mind. He pulled himself back, this was not his problem.

"If you're gonna live here, you have to be able to stand on your own two feet. Those two attacked you because they sensed you were weak, don't ever let them think that."

"But...I am weak. I'm small and thin and...and an in-bred."

Riki didn't know what that term meant and he didn't care. "Yeah, well, I'm a mongrel, but do you see me putting up with any shit?"

The kid slowly shook his head. "Are...are you really Iason Mink's pet?"

Riki gritted his teeth. "Look, you shouldn't walk around if you're gonna let guys like that mess with you. Go home or back to your master or whatever."



He turned and started to walk away, but the kid caught up and fell in step behind him.

“My name’s Anjell.”

“I don’t care, and stop following me.”

“Will you teach me to not be a...a...pussy?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t get involved.”

“But you already...”

Riki stopped so suddenly the kid almost walked into him. “Listen, that was a stupid idea and I won’t be doing it again, so if you get caught in the same situation you’re on your own. Get it?”

Violet eyes rounded and glistened. “But...you helped me. Can’t we be friends...”

Riki paused. Why wasn’t this kid afraid of him, like the rest of his people would be? “No.”

“Why?”

Frustrated because he didn’t have a good reply, Riki growled, spun on his heel and headed back the way he had come. Fuck it, he’d just go back to the condo.

“Riki! Riki, please, wait!”

“Go away kid!” Great, just great. He saved a puppy and now the damn thing planned to follow him home.

“I don’t have anyone else either!”

Riki stopped abruptly and Anjell caught up to him. Those words resonated in his heart as he remembered another frightened young boy that was being bullied, one who had said the exact same thing.

“I see how people look at you and they look at me the same way. Nobody likes an In-Bred. We’re both pets and the same, so...so why can’t we be friends?”

Riki slowly turned, his expression dark and dangerous. “Get this straight. I am *nothing* like you.”

“No, you’re not,” Anjell agreed quietly. “You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met, but I owe you a debt now. How can I repay that if you won’t even allow me to be near you?”

Riki blinked.

***I owe you now. You have to give me a chance to get even.***

His chest tightened as he thought of the kids that he and Guy used to be, and he knew how hard it was to owe a debt to someone and never be able to return it. The old him would never deny someone the chance to make good, because he had insisted on always paying his own debts.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“We both know that isn’t true.”

Riki ran a hand through his hair. “Look, there’s nothing you have that I want, so just forget it, okay?”

“I won’t,” Anjell assured. “I will find a way to repay you for your kindness.” He bowed low from the waist, then turned and walked away.

Riki shook his head, glanced around and spotted several people had noticed their little scene. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

Turning on his heel he started back toward the living areas. He was so focused on berating himself for getting involved that he wasn’t watching

where he was going and ended up walking into a brick wall. Stumbling back, he tried to catch himself, but he'd had too much momentum going and landed on his ass.

"Why do I feel like I am always picking you up, pet?"

Riki glared up at the wall in his way, which looked and sounded suspiciously like Raoul. Because there were two other Blondie's with him, Riki swallowed the vulgar retort that rose to his lips and quickly climbed to his feet.

"Sorry." Riki gritted his teeth and bowed his head slightly, knowing he couldn't make a scene. Even with Orphe gone, Iason was having difficulty changing the minds of many Elites and he had promised to be on his best behavior, especially when faced with one of them. "I'll be more careful from now on."

Raoul lifted an eyebrow at the show of respect, but he had noticed the hands that had curled into fists at Riki's side. So the dog hadn't lost off of its bite? Good, that would be boring indeed.

"Your apology is accepted. Where are you headed in such a rush?"

"Ias...back to the condo."

"Good, I shall go with you. I wished to speak with your master and we can't have you recklessly crashing into anyone else before you get there." Raoul smirked as Riki's lips thinned and he turned to his companions. "I will take care of that item we discussed. Please excuse me."

They nodded, ignored Riki completely and moved on.

"Well, come along pet." Raoul caught Riki around the wrist and started to haul him forward. "Let's get you home."

The moment they were in the lift Riki shook Raoul's hand away. "Get off me!"

"Shouldn't you be on a leash?"

“Shouldn’t you be out in daylight?”

Raoul found himself amused by the archaic insult, but rather than show it he boxed Riki into a corner of the elevator with his larger body. “Shall I take you to my lab and show you what I can do in the darkness?”

Riki was afraid of Raoul’s lab, because he had no idea what went on there and the fact that no one would discuss it caused him great concern. “Sure, wanna see what I can do with laser pike?” he countered, fighting back his fear as he always did.

“Is that a threat, pet?”

“A promise.”

“Oh really?” Raoul sneered bending over him as he and caught Riki’s chin, holding it brutally. “I wonder if you would be as foolishly brave without your master behind you?”

“Iason’s not here now is he?” Fuck! What was he saying? He couldn’t take on a Blondie!

“Is that a *challenge*, Mongrel?”

Riki turned his head, putting his mouth close to Raoul’s ear. “Every computer’s got a back door and I’m real good at rewiring things.”

Raoul regarded Riki long enough to surmise that the boy was bluffing, but still, it was an impressive attempt and perhaps there was some truth to it. He had heard from Iason that Riki’s technical skills were remarkable.

“I imagine you get plenty of back door action with your Master, don’t you, pet?”

“Fuck you.” Riki shoved at him, annoyed when Raoul didn’t move an inch from his position.

“That is something *you* will never do.” Raoul replied calmly. “I am not Iason, and have no interest in your body or such activities, especially with a

mongrel. However..." He suddenly trapped Riki's head between his large hands. "Now your mind, that is of interest to me. I would love to pry it open and dissect it."

Riki glared at him and willed himself not to shake. "I...I'd die first."

"Nonsense." Raoul smiled. "You'll die during."

Before Riki could react Raoul straightened, as they reached Iason's condo level, and the lift doors opened.

"I miss the portals," he sighed as he stepped out into the living room. "I can't understand why Iason removed them and replaced them with such archaic technology."

"Because the portals made Riki uneasy," Iason stated as he unfurled his long legs where he had been seated on the sofa and rose to greet his guest, then looked past his friend to the sullen young man behind him. "What brings you here, Raoul?"

"I have that information you requested yesterday."

Iason held out his gloved hand and Riki hesitated only a moment before he stepped down and moved to Iason's side. "You could have sent it in a transmission." He indicated the opposite sofa and Raoul settled down as Bean appeared. "Bring some wine," he ordered the Furniture.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," Riki said quietly, not wanting to stay in the same room as Raoul, and risk saying something to piss Iason off.

Iason stroked his cheek. "That's fine." Iason could see something had shaken Riki so he would allow the breach in etiquette. He watched Riki walk away and turned his icy gaze to Raoul.

Riki entered their bedroom, stripped off his clothes, and then turned to find Bean standing by the door. "Fuck!" He grabbed the shirt he had just pulled off to cover his lower parts. "What the hell do you want?"

Bean held out a bottle of beer. "I brought you a beverage, Sir."

Riki was about to refuse, but figured he could use it. “Fine, just...leave it there. And don’t fucking come in without knocking.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“If the pet is ill or requires assistance I must be ready to fulfill my duties, therefore knocking would be a waste of time.”

“Just....get out. Now.”

Bean nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

Riki huffed out a breath and headed into the bathroom. He took a long hot shower in which he envisioned throttling Bean, then carefully opened the doors to make sure that the lurking Shit Schmoo hadn’t reappeared and offered to dress him. Finding the coast clear he stepped out, and decided to use the dryer tube for a change, so his hair would dry within a few seconds.

He returned to the bedroom, picked up the beer and brought it to the bed with him, then climbed between the crisp clean sheets. It was only late afternoon, but he figured Iason would be in the mood by the time he finished talking to Raoul, simply because the Blondie had come home so early.

Taking another sip of beer, He picked up a tube of hand cream that Kanin had given him as a gift, and rubbed it thoroughly over his hands. His skin tended to get too dry from the recirculated air of the condo. His ring caught the light and he took a moment to admire it. It had taken him awhile to get used to wearing the ring, and now when he took it off his hand felt just as weird.

He gulped down the remainder of his beer, then fluffed the pillows behind him, grabbed the book he was reading off the nightstand, and got comfortable to wait for Iason.

Iason entered the room almost forty minutes later and smiled at the sight of Riki sound asleep, his book flopped open on his lap, his head tilted at an uncomfortable angle against the pillow where he had dropped off while reading.

Pulling the book out of Riki's limp fingers, Iason set it on the nightstand and carefully pulled Riki further down in the bed. Riki turned on his side, mumbled in his sleep and Iason smoothed his hair away from his face.

Oh how he loved this boy, he thought with the same wonder he always got when he considered such feelings. For the first time since he had met Riki, he did not instantly have the urge to take him sexually. Instead, he sat and just watched his young lover sleep, enjoyed the steady, calming sound of Riki's breathing, and the way his lashes fluttered against his dark skin as he entered REM sleep.

He pulled off his glove and set his hand against Riki's bare chest, reveling in the vibration of a Human heart. What must it be like, he wondered, to feel such a thing beating inside one's chest? Could Riki also feel the blood flowing through his veins? Was it similar to the lubricant that chorused beneath his artificial endo-skeleton? He wore flesh on the outside, but inside he was still a machine, except for his brain. He did not feel heat or cold. He did not know what it was like to feel oxygen filling his lungs, or how it would feel when that air was depleted.

***Do you wish to be Human, my son?***

"I am not Human," he replied quietly. Wishing for something that could not be was a waste of resources.

***Are you unhappy as a son of Jupiter?***

"No." He appreciated the things he had, appreciated that Jupiter had given him life. And he could live vicariously through Riki, for those Human qualities he sometimes coveted. "I am merely curious."

***Should I change the boy to be more like you, so you may understand one another better?***

“No.” He would not wish anything of Riki to be changed. He put his other hand to his own chest, knowing there would be no sound, no vibration or rhythm there. “What does it feel like to have a heart?”

***It is a Human’s main weakness. You are not weak, Iason.***

Iason would willingly give up some of his strength to have a heart. To be able to share this unique rhythm with Riki. “I don’t agree. Riki is strong, the strongest Human I know.”

***He is unique.***

“I wish to be with him always. I want to make him happy.”

***Is he unhappy?***

“He doesn’t like living here. He doesn’t like being a pet, yet I am forcing him to live this way.”

***The boy has made the choice of his own will. I offered him freedom and he declined.***

Iason blinked, startled, then slowly smiled. “Did he?” He caressed Riki’s face. “Did he now?” He felt that odd twisting in his chest again and frowned. “I may require maintenance soon.”

***Yes. Come to me when you are ready.***

“I will.” Iason felt the subtle release and sudden absence as Jupiter ended her communication.

Riki moaned in his sleep and reached out, catching Iason’s hand and tucking it under his chin. Iason smiled again and continued his vigil.



## Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

Cal is upset about sudden changes, and Riki discovers something disturbing about his past.

Cal scowled at his reflection in the full length mirror as he tugged at the cuff sleeves of his uniform shirt, yet no matter how much he pulled they remained two inches above his wrist line. His slacks were the same, rising far too high above his shoes, making him look no better than a beggar on the street of Ceres. He stepped out of the slacks and examined the cuff, but he had already let the hem out twice and there was simply no more material left to make them any longer.

Dropping down on his bed, he clutched the slacks to his chest. What was he going to do? He'd hit a growth spurt the last few months, which was more of a surprise to him than anyone, and now none of his clothes fit him properly. When Master Iason came called for him to return, would he be angry at his new height? Furniture's were supposed to stay small, boyish and he no longer was. Would the Master sell him if he got too big?

A knock on his door startled him and he quickly slipped into the slacks again. Regardless of how they looked he could not be seen unclothed. "Come in."

Katze opened the door and stepped inside. "Hey, breakfast is rea..."

He took in the too short pants and jacket as well as the reddening face of the young boy who wore them. Being a former Furniture, and having gone through similar trauma when he'd started to grow into a man, Katze assessed the situation immediately.

"It's gonna be okay, Cal."

"I'm too *big* now," Cal whispered and turned back to the mirror, horrified at his own reflection. "The Master will not want me like this. I can't *ever* go

back.”

Katze couldn't speak for Iason, he honestly had no idea how the Blondie would react to a man-sized Cal, but he didn't think it would be as bad as the young boy believed. After all, When Katze had grown too tall he was simply redistributed. He was no longer Iason's Furniture, but Iason was still his Master.

He walked over, set his hands on the boy's shoulders, a little surprised that Cal's head was now just below his chin. “Iason won't just throw you away.” When Cal didn't respond, he added. “Riki wouldn't let that happen.” He turned Cal towards him, forced him to meet his gaze. “You know that, right? You know Riki likes you, he'd never let anything happen to you.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Sure. Just as you like him. Weren't you just as upset when you thought he was dead?”

Cal's face turned the colour of ash. “I...I don't love him or anything!” he insisted quickly. “I...He's my charge, that's all! Riki can't really like me, Master Iason will be angry!”

Katze smirked, because he understood Iason possessiveness when it came to his pet. “Iason knows he doesn't have to worry about what is between you and Riki, just like he knows as much as I care about Riki there is nothing between us either. Hell, we're Furniture, what could we possibly do?”

That was certainly true, Furniture was automatically castrated at the age of five, yet that fact did not ease his anxiety.

“I will be too clumsy now. I...I will be in the way of everything!”

How could he possibly maintain a Furniture's creed of invisibility when he was so large? He would not be able to simply fade into the background until his Master called for him, as he had before. His bed...his bed in the condo

would be too small now, and when you add the new clothes would have to be purchased to outfit him, it would all be a horrible expense on his Master.

He slumped down on his bed. He never used to be so emotional, he could always maintain his distance and balance, but lately it seems that he couldn't maintain anything. It was as if his body and feelings had a mind of their own and he couldn't suppress them. That too would be an added burden to his Master, a Furniture who worried, a Furniture who had moods. That couldn't be tolerated.

He looked up at Katze and in all seriousness asked. "Will you kill me, please?"

"No."

Katze had expected Cal to ask him, because he knew that being a Furniture was all the kid knew, all he lived for, as it was for most of their kind. He also recognized the struggles that Cal was dealing with, because even a castrated boy had hormones and experienced a form of puberty. Even a mild change in his emotional and physical health would be difficult for someone who was technically supposed to be emotionally dead inside.

His own journey into adulthood was manageable only because he'd loved to read and study and so he understood what was happening to him. Plus, Iason had been surprisingly tolerant of his awkwardness at that age, and he was relatively sure the Blondie would be even more tolerant of Cal. Convincing Cal of that, however, was the challenge.

Cal slid to the floor on his knees. "Please! You have to! I am useless like this and I...I don't want to be sold to a Brothel House!"

The horror stories of Furniture in Brothel Houses were very real. Regardless of whether they were a eunuch or not, the masters of the brothels often allowed their worst and most violent customers free reign over Furniture as long as their bodies were still young and supple. The damage that could be done, or what one could be forced to do when you have no sexual desire was terrifying. And the Furniture that were too mature for such tastes, like Katze were usually recycled.

A shudder overtook him before he could stop it, but he shook it off.

“Cal, get up.”

Cal obeyed, because he was programmed to.

“I’m not going to kill you, because Iason would then kill me, and I don’t wanna die.”

“But...” Cal lifted his shimmering gaze. “What am I to do?”

Katze held out his hand. “Let’s call Iason.”

“No!” Cal scooted backwards until he was against the bed, which looked rather comical with his now longer legs. “Please don’t call him! I’ll do anything! Please!”

Horried to have the usually calm and stoic boy suddenly so desperate, Katze moved forward and did the only thing he could think of, he crouched on the floor and pulled Cal into his arms.

“I won’t!” he assured, alarmed to find Cal was shaking so badly that he feared he would rattle the teeth out of his head. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t call him.” At least not about this. He gave Iason weekly updates on how Cal was, but he would not mention this at least.

Cal couldn’t remember ever being held, except the one brief time that Riki had hugged him, and he was shocked to find the sudden warmth from another caused him to tremble even more. His arms lay limp at his sides, for he was unsure what else to do with them and his heart threatened to beat out of his chest. What was wrong with him? This wasn’t how a Furniture behaved! How could he degrade himself like this?

A spark of memory came back to him, from somewhere deep in his subconscious.

*He was in a room, a heavy domed scanner on his head, and the prick of needles against his temple, his eye lids secured so they would remain. A screen in front of him and a whirl of images flashed in quick succession,*

*some pleasant, some horrifying. In his head was sound, tranquil music, then harsher tones, then screams, then laughter. So many sounds, so many sights and he couldn't close his eyes! His tiny body tried to squirm out of the chair but the clamps over his ankles and wrists prevented it.*

*And then, there was a young blonde girl. She was so pretty, and sweet and innocent, oh how he missed her....He jolted as electricity zapped through his body.*

*"This girl is nothing."*

*"S...she's my sister..." The only family he had after his parents died. She didn't have to go to Guardian, not like he did. He hadn't like it in Guardian. Another painful spasm intrude on his thoughts.*

*"All that matters is your Master."*

*"M...Master." The vision on the screen changed to one of his sister being beaten and he felt the bile rise up in his throat, but he forced himself to relax, to try and not let it bother him. However, when they started to rape her, he cried out and tears flooded his eyes. "P...please!"*

*The jolt this time left him near breathless in agony, and still he was forced to watch.*

*"You are Furniture. You are whatever your Master decides. You are nothing outside of what your Master wishes you to be. You feel nothing. You wish for nothing. You are nothing."*

*"N...Nothing."*

*The scene with his sister repeated; first a pretty little girl skipping in a meadow, then being beaten and gang raped, and still he watched. Over and over they repeated the cycle, he could hear her humming in his ears, then her cries, then her screams. Slowly, his tears dried, his movements stilled, and he became nothing.*

*"Cal?"*

Cal realized that Katze had been calling to him. This would not do, he should have answered the first time Katze called.

“Yes, Sir?” he asked calmly.

Katze was peering at him with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Sir.” He was nothing. He felt nothing. This is how it was, how he was. It was a relief to return to nothing.

“Shit.” Katze, as if understanding the sudden transformation pulled Cal close again. “Come on, don’t do that. Not with me.”

After a few moments, when Cal remained stiff and silent, Katze pulled back, stood and pulled the boy with him. “Let’s go buy you some new clothes, at least.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

Katze rolled his eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

Riki’s eyes flew open and he found himself in a field of flowers. The sun was shining, the sky was an incredible blue and there was a strange, but pleasant chirping sound in the grass at his feet. He heard laughter, one low and rumbling the other close to a squeal and he moved forward, suddenly needing to see where that laughter was coming from.

He stumbled to a halt as he spotted a colored cloth draped across the grass, the smell of homemade food and...there again was the scent of chocolate.

A tall man with luxuriously long, dark hair and opal colored eyes was laughing as he held up what looked like a small, square cake of chocolate, between his two fingers. A toddler, with the same dark hair and eyes was

giggling and trying to jump for the treat. Suddenly the boy threw himself at the man's legs and they tumbled to the ground in laughter.

"Papa," Riki whispered and dropped to his knees in the soft, sweet smelling grass.

The child climbed across his father's chest and grabbed the brownie, shoving it all the way in his mouth before his father could take it back.

"You little rascal!" The man laughed and grabbed his son, started tickling him, delighting in the squeals that followed. "Now I'm gonna eat you up!"

Riki rubbed his suddenly cramping chest, could feel the smile forming on his lips without his knowledge as he watched himself being played with by a doting father. He could feel the waves of affection filtering towards him as he remembered how the grass had tickled his skin, how the crickets chirped and the sun shined and his father had played with him. He was loved! He did love!

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the sky, blocking out the sun and Riki turned his eyes upwards as an unexplained, yet seemingly ancient fear crawled through him,

"Run!" he screamed but the pair could not hear him. "Run! Papa, run!" He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to see this!

The sounds of nature halted abruptly and the grass that had once felt like silk, now cut and stabbed at his skin. The man was no longer smiling, and instead was pulling the little boy to his feet.

"Run son!"

The boy's laughter turned to tears as his father grabbed his hand and they started running, but his little legs weren't big enough to keep up, and even when his father swooped him up into his arms Riki's heart pounded in his chest.

The massive ship remained over them, they couldn't outrun it on the ground, and Riki already knew this. Even as that child, he knew this, and had feared what was going to happen to them.

His father dodged into a thicket of trees, never broke his stride until they were well inside the brush, then he stopped by a particularly large tree.

"Climb, son. Climb as high as you can but stay under the canopy."

"Papa!"

"Do as I say!" His father hefted his son up so the boy could reach the lowest branch. "Keep climbing and don't look down. Stay there until I come for you, do you hear me?"

"Papa! Don't leave me!"

"I love you, son."

Riki watched his father kiss the boy's forehead, lifted trembling fingers to the same spot on his own, as if he could still feel the impression, and watched the boy climb.

"You can do this. I'll be back for you."

"P...Promise?"

"I promise."

Riki watched his older body fade, and then suddenly, he was looking through the eyes of a child as he climbed and climbed higher into the tree. His face and bare arms were scratched and cut by the branches, his tears blurred his vision, but still he climbed and then, when he was just shy of pushing through the top of the leaves he settled on a branch and waited for his father to return.

He waited and waited, the sun went down, and the moon came up and he trembled, because he was only four and he was still afraid of the dark. Every sound made him jump, every movement threatened to push his heart



out of his tiny body so that sleep was an impossibility. Tears streamed freely now, as he shivered in the cool evening air, and still he waited.

His father had told him he would return and his father would never lie to him. The sun rose again but there seemed to be less warmth than there had been the day before. He was exhausted, cold and hungry and he wanted his father to come back. Sun and moon. Sun and moon. How many days had passed he wondered as he shivered from cold and fever. Still his father had not returned.

Why had no one come for him? He didn't understand what was happening. Had his father left him? He was a good boy. Why would his father do this? Had he been forgotten? He tried to think what he could have done to be abandoned. Had he been too loud, laughing and squealing when he was having fun? Had he talked too much? Papa did say he was a chatter-box. Had he been too greedy when asking for toys?

"I'll b...be good, P...papa," he whispered through chattering teeth as the sun started to dip once again. "I...I won't talk so much or make any noise. I...I won't ask for anything e...ever again." Oh please come back, he prayed. Please come and take me home!

When the sun started to dip once again, he decided to climb down, despite his father's orders.

He dropped to the ground and looked around. "Papa?" he called. "Papa? Co...come back. You p...promised!"

Silence. Slowly, he started to walk.

Riki gasped as Jupiter released him from the mind sync. He ripped the headset off his head and struggled out of the chair just as he started to vomit.

"Riki!"

Papa? He thought as he saw a figure coming towards him, but his vision was too blurred to make it out clearly. "You...came back...I'll be g...

goo...” His eyes rolled up as darkness claimed him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So far the story is going exactly where I wanted it to, and I hope that you are all enjoying it as well. Thank you to all those who have commented, and I hope you will continue to offer me feedback as the story progresses for it really does help me write better!

Cheers!

## Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki recovers and Guy is given an opportunity

*How much further was it to the road? It hadn't seemed this far when they came in, but it was taking him forever to get out of the forest. Should he have gone back to the meadow? That place had turned so dark, and what had had put that look on Papa's face? He had never seen that look before and it scared him. His legs trembled from all the walking and his stomach hurt so bad; he wished he'd had another brownie. He was so very cold, he couldn't ever remember being this cold and he couldn't stop shivering.*

*He tripped over a thick, raised tree root and cried out as he flew forward. Pain shot up his leg and across his cheek, as tears filled his eyes. Where was Papa? Why hadn't he come back? He promised to come back and Papa always kept his promises. Was Papa mad at him? Maybe he shouldn't have tried to eat the second brownie. Papa said it was bad to be greedy. His stomach rumbled painfully and he wished he had that brownie now, but that was still being greedy, right?*

*Sitting up, he brushed the dead leaves and dirt away from him and saw a line of blood across his knee and down his leg. His lower lip quivered, and he dropped his head on his knees and curled his arms around them. He shouldn't have fussed about going on a picnic. Papa was so busy and he'd thrown a tantrum because he had wanted to see the forest animals and feed the birds. He'd been a bad boy, taking Papa away from work. This was all his fault. The darkness came because he was a bad boy. Papa was gone because he was a bad boy.*

*"I'll be good. Please come back, Papa," he sobbed. "I won't ask for anything ever again. I promise to be quiet and not bother you. I won't even ask for food. Please, please come back."*

*"Come back...I'll be good."*

Iason glanced down at the sleeping youth in his lap and gently caressed Riki's hair, allowing the ebony strands to filter gently through his fingers. "Sssshh, pet. You're fine."

He'd been quite concerned when he'd received Jupiter's demand while he was in a meeting. He had quickly excused himself and hurried to her chamber, no doubt making a spectacle of himself in the process. The sight of an Elite actually running was sure to set the rumor mill to overflowing by tomorrow.

When he arrived at Jupiter's chamber, he found Riki throwing up, and then his lover fainted dead away just before he could reach him. Jupiter had claimed that she had breached a part of the barrier that had been in Riki's mind, and he had suffered a shock. He didn't ask for details, he was too concerned about Riki. He carried Riki back to the condo in his arms, and unlike when he had retrieved him from the conservatory and could move under the cloak of darkness, this time it had been in broad daylight for all of Eos to see.

Once they reached home, rather than put Riki to bed, he'd decided to settle on the sofa and wait for him to wake on his own. Riki was obviously still caught in whatever memory Jupiter had unlocked, and watching his lover sob and fret made him quite anxious, but he remained quiet and patient and continued his vigil.

"Cold...so cold."

Iason glanced at Bean, who he knew was lurking in the corner somewhere. "Bring me a blanket."

"Yes, Sir."

"Come back."

"I'm right here, Riki," Iason assured as Bean reappeared and draped the blanket over Riki's shivering form. Iason adjusted it so it was over Riki's shoulders, then again turned his attention to the head on his lap. "You are safe, love. You are warm and safe now and nothing can hurt you."

“Papa?” Riki’s hand curled into the one Iason had laid across his chest.  
“Sorry. I’m ...sorry.”

Papa? Riki’s buried memories had been of his father? The mongrel had never mentioned either parent, and Iason’s initial investigation into Riki only showed him as a ward of Guardian. There had been no information on a family. Surely if the boy had a father he wouldn’t have been living as he was in Ceres? No, Riki had been in an orphan asylum. If there had been a parent, he’d been gone a very long time.

“You’ve done nothing to be sorry for,” he assured quietly and continued to caress Riki’s hair until the younger man once again drifted off into a more peaceful slumber.

“Do you care for anything to eat or drink, Sir?” Bean asked.

“Yes, bring me a wine.”

Bean nodded as Iason’s wrist communicator beeped. He pressed a button on it and a hologram of Raoul’s face appeared in front of him.

“Iason. What happened? Why did you leave so abruptly?”

“I had business to attend to.”

“There are reports you were running in the corridors.”

“I was in a hurry.”

“So I see.” Raoul’s gaze narrowed on the sleeping pet. “Is he ill?”

“He’s suffered a shock.”

“Oh?” The scientist in Raoul immediately took notice. “In what way?”

As no one else was aware of the deal he and Riki had struck with Jupiter, Iason chose his next words carefully. “I threatened to show him a picture of you unclothed.”

Raoul blinked. “Am I to take offence to that?”

“Negotiable.”

“As we are nearly identical physically, I cannot see how seeing such a thing would damage him so.”

“Perhaps not, however threatening to dissect him might.”

“He told you? How disappointing. ”

“He muttered something about it in his dreams a few nights ago. I can only assume he would get such an idea from something you said to him.”

“I understood that Humans appreciated humor.”

“Perhaps, however as Riki already mistrusts you, you can understand why he would not find such a thing amusing.”

“Let me have him for an hour, I can program him so he does.”

“Raoul, let me be clear. You and I are brothers and friends, I trust you with my life, as well as Riki’s.”

Raoul offered a mock bow. “I am honored.”

“However, if you ever threaten to harm Riki again, even in jest, I will disassemble you with my bare hands, friend or not.”

Rather than take offence, Raoul simply smiled. “Perhaps it is you I need to program with a sense of humor?”

“I am quite serious, Raoul. Riki has enough to deal with without having to suffer through your deluded sense of play.”

“All of his hardships are brought on by his own pride. There are any number of pets that would trade places with him in an instant to be at your side, and you know it.”

“That is beside the point...” Iason began only to have Raoul interrupt him.

“It is exactly the point. He believes himself above his status, above being a pet. Naturally such notions will upset people.”

“He is more than a pet!”

“To you, yes, but to no one else, and he needs to understand that. The special treatment he has already received thus far has greatly angered others and put you in a precarious position, which is why Orphe could so easily take over during your absence. That was why people were so willing to listen to him, because they believed you had moved beyond being reasonable and were no longer working in the Syndicate’s best interests.”

“My relationship with Riki has never interfered with my judgement or with my work.”

“Others do not see it that way; they believe the mongrel has corrupted your mind.”

Iason mulled over Raoul’s words for a moment. “Their opinion does not matter. Orphe was flawed in a very basic manner. He would have led us all into bankruptcy and civil war.”

“Yes, and our brothers would have allowed it, all because you decided to keep a mongrel as a pet.”

“One has nothing to do with the other. My personal life is private and my work speaks for itself.”

“You are not above the laws, Iason.”

“I have never claimed to be.”

Raoul lifted his hands peaceably. “Let’s agree to disagree.”

Both Blondie’s grew quiet and focused their attention on Riki, who still slept soundly on Iason’s lap.

“I am aware that your support has also come at a cost,” Iason stated quietly.  
“It is appreciated, Raoul.”

“Yes well, while I still disapprove of the trouble your pet causes, I can see that he has changed you in ways I never thought possible.”

“Are you referring to my flouting the law again?”

“No.” Raoul paused. “He makes you happy.”

Iason’s eyes flew upwards to Raoul’s image, started. “Happy?”

“Does he not? As Elites we can experience many surface emotions, annoyance, impatience, appreciation, curiosity, mistrust, and a level of contentment, yet I have never seen any of us show even a spark of the happiness I have witnessed in Humans. Not until you brought that boy home and for the first time ever I have seen it in one of our own kind.”

Iason nodded. He supposed that was the best word to describe how he felt when he was with Riki. “It is because of him that I have experienced a great level of new emotions,” he admitted. “I feel more...complete knowing these.”

“I wish you would allow me to...”

“No. I will not allow you to use Riki as one of your lab experiments, Raoul.”

Raoul smirked. “Actually, I was hoping you’d volunteer yourself. As a child of Jupiter, you must understand the significance of such an emotional growth?”

“I do.”

Raoul grew quiet. “And do you agree that further study may help ensure that it is not something that will turn into a flaw like Orphe’s?”

Iason looked down at Riki again. He still didn’t even understand all these emotions himself, but he was already having to deal with Jupiter poking



around inside his head. Did he really want Raoul at him as well?

“I’ll consider it,” he replied, knowing that he did owe Raoul for saving Riki’s life and for keeping the true manner of Orphe’s death a secret.

“That is all I ask.” Raoul glanced behind him, nodded and then turned back to Iason again. “My next appointment is here.”

“Understood.” Iason reached for his wrist to cut off the transmission.

“Iason?”

“Yes?”

“If your pet feels a sense of lingering fatigue or nausea after his shock, be sure to give him some Rexiontol tablets and warm broth to settle him.”

“So you do care about Riki?”

“Not at all, I simply prefer my lab subjects to be healthy *before* I dissect them.”

Iason chuckled as Raoul’s image abruptly vanished and he glanced down at Riki affectionately. “I think we’re finally winning him over, pet.”

Riki stirred and opened his eyes. “I...Iason?”

“Right here.”

Riki blinked, realized where he was and his position, and that his cheeks were wet. What the hell? Was he crying? He bolted up and wiped at his face, embarrassed. “What happened?”

“You fainted while with Jupiter.” Iason touched his shoulder. “She said you had a memory and you’ve been calling out for your father. Would you like to tell me about it?”

His father? He didn’t have a fath... “Shit.”

Miraculously Bean appeared with a large bowl just as Riki began to vomit again, until all that was left were dry heaves and Bean provided water and a cool cloth as Iason gently pulled Riki back onto his lap and bathed his sweating face with the cloth.

“G...God,” he croaked, closed his eyes and for the first time ever, turned into Iason for comfort.

Why hadn't he remembered that before? Where had that memory even come from? He'd had a father! That day....that day had been such a perfect day, a fun and exciting day and then...then the darkness happened and his father went away.

The memory began to filter back in pieces, and while he still trembled, the recovery of it no longer made him ill. He'd stayed for days in that tree, three, possibly four at least before climbing down and trying to find his father. He had walked and walked and walked, falling down more than once before he finally managed to find his way out of the forest and onto a main road.

A citizen picked him up on the road and took him to the nearest shelter where they pronounced him as dehydrated, starving and suffering from blood loss from multiple cuts and lacerations. By that time, however, he no longer had the ability to speak. Trauma had robbed him of his voice and so he hadn't been able to tell them to look for his father, or of the darkness that came that day.

They fed him, treated his injuries and gave him new clothes. Then, they listed him as an orphan and placed him on the next shuttle off planet. He was going to a place call Guardian where he would be taken care of, because there was no room for him in the orphanages on this planet.

Riki slid up so that his face was nestled against Iason's chest as he gripped then released Iason's tunic, trying to get a handle on his emotions. Grip and release, hold and flex. When Iason pulled his hair over his shoulder, Riki's hand latched onto it, but not painfully so, just enough to twirl it back and forth around his fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Iason said softly and kissed the top of Riki’s head. Even if he didn’t know the entire story yet, he could tell that Riki was hurting.

“I...I had a father,” Riki whispered. “I...I think he was...killed or...or something by aliens.” Realization dawned and he tilted his head back, searching for those familiar blue eyes. “I’m...I’m not from here. I don’t... belong here.”

Iason’s arms curled protectively around Riki. “You do belong here. This is your place, Riki, beside me. Your past cannot change that.”

“But...” How had he come to be here? What planet was he from if not Amoi? Was he even Human? What was he? Who was he? “I...I don’t know what’s happening.”

“We will figure it out together, Riki. Please don’t fret.”

Was that why he had never allowed himself to get too close to anyone, because of some ingrained fear of abandonment? Why he never set unreasonable goals for himself, or why he detested receiving gifts from others? Because of this hidden trauma as a child?

“You...You’ll stay with me,” he said quietly as he gripped Iason’s tunic again. “Right?”

“To the very end, I promise you.”

Riki quieted and sat there, letting Iason soothe him. Iason pulled the blanket that Riki had tossed off earlier back up around him and it made him feel safe and secure. “I don’t like this.” He didn’t like this feeling of uncertainty, this...unprecedented filtering of emotions and feelings that he’d never had before. “I don’t like feeling like this.”

“Would you like a sedative?”

Riki shook his head.

“Then perhaps some soup?”

Again Riki shook his head, eating was the last thing on his mind.

Iason caressed him. “Is there something else you would like to take your mind off things?”

Riki lifted his gaze to Iason’s again, then slowly nodded. “Y...yeah.”

“Shall we go to the bedroom?” He knew Riki disliked doing such things around where the Furniture could see, so he was surprised when his lover sat up and straddled his lap.

“Here,” he said, cradling Iason’s face and lowering his mouth to the Blonde’s. “Do it here.”

“As you wish,” Iason replied before responding to Riki’s kiss.

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Guy tested out his new mechanical arm by throwing an apple in the air and catching it. He took another apple and juggled them with the same hand. He did the same with a knife, then he threw an apple in the air with the knife, effectively pinning the fruit to the wall.

There was no delay in what he wanted the arm to do and what it did. It felt a little heavier than his real arm, but the organic flesh that covered it matched the skin on the other so you couldn’t tell it was synthetic circuitry. This arm did feel stronger than his right, much stronger actually.

“Looks like you’ve got the hang of it now.”

Guy turned as Shiao entered the kitchen and was surprised to find heat flood his face. “Yeah.” He stared at the apple pinned to the wall and quickly retrieved it. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Shiao poured them both a drink. “Are you good with a knife?”

Guy pulled the apple off the knife, set it on the counter and ran his finger over the blade, pleased when he could feel the prick of it against his new skin. "I used to be."

"Was it a necessity in Ceres, to be familiar with such a weapon?"

"Yeah. We couldn't get our hands on any pistols or wands, so all we had were stickers, knives and our hands and feet to fight with."

Shiao dipped his head into the refrigerator and pulled out a bowl of cold pasta that Guy had made the night before, then retrieved two forks and set that on the breakfast island between them. "It must have been a difficult life for you, in Ceres."

Guy took one of the Island stools as Shiao handed him a fork then settled next to him. "It was what it was."

Shiao regarded him quietly for a moment, then scooped up some noodles and put them in his mouth. He had coerced Guy to get a replacement arm after his idea for dealing with Foh had worked. The rodent had agreed to do the work for almost half the cost as originally stated, once Shiao had advised of his plan to freeze the plants and make a paste to extract the thread. They had saved thousands on the deal. When Guy still tried to refuse, Shiao used guilt by saying as a companion he should be able to play arena games, and he couldn't with just the one arm.

"It looks good on you."

Guy glanced down at his new hand, he still had mixed feelings about it. His debt to Shiao was growing and at this rate he would never be able to pay it back properly, unless...Unless the Onyx asked for something more than companionship.

"I don't like owing people."

"I know." Shiao smiled. "So, I found a way you can repay the cost of your arm."

Guy's interest spiked. "How?"

"You're good with your hands, and now that you have two I want you to start taking care of the machinery at the main plant."

Guy blinked. "Don't you already have droids for that?"

"For the assembly machines, yes, but this is a side division and these machines require a little more finesse. They can be temperamental and droid's simply don't have the necessary capacity to deal with them."

"What kind of machines are they?"

Shiao smiled and slid off his stool, held out his hand to Guy. "I was hoping you would ask. Come I will show you."

Guy gently slapped the Onxy's hand away, as he always did, and rose. He wasn't a woman who required a hand up. "Let's go then."

They left the condo, climbed into Shiao's Elevated Vehicle and shot into the air. The main plant was close to where they lived so that Shiao could attend quickly if there was an urgent issue. They arrived moments later and Shiao guided him, not through the main doors that Guy had been to before, but around to the side where there were several dark buildings apart from the main warehouse.

"Close your eyes."

"Huh?" Guy asked, startled as they stopped at a pair of metal bay doors.

Shiao smiled. "You heard me."

"Why?"

"Just do as I say."

"Fine, freak." Guy closed his eyes, heard the sound of the heavy doors rolling up, then a hand on his arm as he was guided forward. "Can I look now?"

“No. Wait.”

Guy sighed, and allowed himself to be lead for a few more moments, then they stopped suddenly.

“You may open your eyes.”

Guy did and then gasped. Cycles! An enormous bay of nothing but brand new aircycles! His mouth began to salivate, his fingers itched to dig into the grease of all that machinery. “W...what? I don’t understand?”

“This is a side project I started a few years ago. We have the standard cycles that are on the market now, of course; the newest versions available.”

“You...you want me to help you fix these bikes?” Guy asked, stunned as he moved towards the first one and lovingly traced the seat and bars. “But... these are prime! These machines could run practically on a rider’s thoughts. There’s no way there are any issues with them!”

“Correct, and we do have those for our resale and special client database. However,” Shiao walked over to a panel on the wall and pressed a button. “This is what I was hoping you could help me with.”

Another large bay door opened and behind it were bike frames, engines, mechanical parts, and more tools and diagnostic equipment than Guy had ever seen, could ever even imagine.

“My partners and I are interested in creating a new kind of cycles, one that is outside the current stream that will appeal not only to the wealthy, but are also durable and safe for those living in less affable cities.”

Guy slowly entered the room with a sense of trepidation and awe. He ran his hands reverently over some of the parts, then turned his attention to the clear cabinets that displayed brand new, never used tools.

“What do you think?” Shiao asked, pleased to see, for the first time since he had known Guy, an expression other than sadness or resigned acceptance on his companion’s face.

“Think?” Guy’s eyes tried to take everything in. “I don’t know what to think.”

“You do know about these kinds of machines, do you not?” Shiao already knew Guy did, he’d done some digging on one of his trips to Amoi and learned that Guy had been one of the best bike mechanics in Ceres.

“I...yes, sure, but...I mean...” A real working garage, with unlimited parts and equipment was a dream he had never allowed himself to have. In Ceres you had to beg, borrow or steal to get anything of use, and even then it was always less than second hand. He turned to Shiao. “Are you serious about this?”

“I am. It would be an enormous help if you could do it.” Shiao moved forward and ran his gloved hand over the spotless workbench. “As an Elite I know how such things are made and can certainly have them replicated in an assembly, but I have no human vision of what such a vehicle could be. No...” he paused searching for the right word, then let his gaze penetrate Guy’s thoughtfully. “No Human imagination.”

“But...why me?”

“I know you, and I trust you. I can hire more people to work under you, of course, but for the creative force I need someone who I believe can turn out a good product and not try to serve their own purposes while under the guise of my company.”

Guy felt a lump swelling in his throat. No one but Riki had ever expressed such faith in him. Not ever. “I...” He rubbed his new arm. “Is that why you wanted me to get this so much?”

“I will admit that my own selfishness played a part. I have been promising my partners to get this side project started for several months, and I knew you would certainly work better with two hands. Forgive me if I have overstepped.”

So, it wasn’t out of pity, Guy thought with relief. Shiao had wanted to give him the arm so he could be of better use to him. While a part of him felt a



spike of resentment at being used, a much larger part felt as if a weight had been lifted off his chest. That meant that he wasn't really in debt to Shiao for the replacement arm, because it was a means to an end for the Onyx.

"So, what do you think? If there is anything else that is not here and you require I will have it brought immediately."

"I...What about being your companion?"

"You still will be." Shiao stepped forward and clasped Guy by the shoulders. "Again, I am being selfish, so do forgive me. You can work here during the day and still be my companion in the evenings, and of course you will be paid separately for both positions."

That didn't seem right, somehow. Guy wasn't always the sharpest tool in the shed, but he could certainly see when the benefits were outrageously in his favor. Shiao had done so much for him already, and now to give him such a dream job, while still letting him stay and live with him....it was too much!

"I can't."

Shiao scowled. "Why? Will the two positions be too much? You need only work as my companion in a secondary capacity and can concentrate your efforts on this project. We can hire another Furniture or we can disregard the companion role altogether..."

"No!" Guy was startled by the vehemence in his voice, and by the fact that he didn't want to stop being Shiao's companion. He'd become use to living with the Elite, was dependent now on feeling useful to Shiao and doing little things for him, even if it was just cooking and cleaning.

"Guy?"

Guy flushed and stepped back, curled his arms around himself and tried to get used to that sensation again. "I...I mean, no I don't want to stop being your companion."

Shiao regarded him quietly for a long moment. “I see. You wish to decline this offer then?”

“No, I...I want to do both, but...well, I don’t want you to pay me for both.”

“You must be paid a wage for your efforts, Guy. I am not like other Elites.” Even when he employed Furniture, while technically he owned them, he secretly gave them play money for their own use, which was completely unheard of, and if they wanted to leave he would find them a position somewhere else.

“I know, I’m not saying that, I just mean...” Guy took a deep breath, tried to organize his thoughts. This was such a big opportunity, but he also didn’t want to screw up what he had with Shiao. He couldn’t go back to living alone again, he didn’t want to damn it! “I’ll do the job here, if...if you really think I can?”

“I do.”

Guy nodded, felt a flush of pleasure. “Then, I...I can be your companion for...for free.”

“Free?”

“Yeah, we...instead of a companion we’d be...” Pairing partners? Bond Mates? Neither of those fit, yet those were the usual terms for two men living together in Ceres. “F...Friends. Roommates, in a way.”

“You would do this, of your own will? Live with me and continue as we are and consider us...friends?”

Guy nodded, appalled at how shy he suddenly felt. “If...if that is okay? I mean, f...friends do things for each other, right? At least they do in Ceres, so it’s okay for us to do that, right?”

Shiao was an Elite, and Guy realized that such a relationship might not be accepted or even possible in their society. No, they weren’t on Amoi anymore and so they weren’t bound by those laws. He glanced at Shiao, saw the Onyx was considering his suggestion.

“A friend. I have never truly had a friend before.” Shiao dropped his hand on Guy’s shoulder and smile. “I believe I may enjoy the experience. I accept; we shall be friends and roommates then.”

Guy grinned and for the first time in a very long while, felt a sense of hope and purpose.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

As in every relationship there are ups and downs

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi everyone, sorry for the delay in updating, but I had been working off a flash drive because my computer kept crashing. Well, this flash drive contained all I had written on this story as well as several others, and I have somehow lost it so I have had to try and remember what scenes I could and write them down. Not sure if this will interrupt the flow of the story, but I will do my best to get it back to what I had intended as soon as I can.

Iason rubbed the bridge of his nose, annoyed by the consistent pounding behind his eyes. He didn't used to get headaches. His android body never experienced fatigue or strain and he could scan documents and data faster than even the high-end terminals. However, since his recovery and having to retrain his body, his organic mind seemed to be creating the true experience of the physical effects of stress. He glanced at his wrist unit and saw that it was already quite late. He'd been in here for six hours, after already working nearly twelve in his regular office.

A lot had happened in the time he and Riki were recovering. Many mice had decided to play while the cat was away, and trying to ascertain all the hidden routes, deviations, plots and sub-plots that the rodents had taken in order to hide their misdeeds was ridiculously tiresome.

"I'm away for a little while and everyone gets delusions of grandeur," he muttered as he squeezed his eyes closed and sat back in his chair.

He had been so focused on finding Riki and keeping him that he never considered how many would use his disappearance or apparent death to

their own advantage. Actually, that wasn't entirely true, even before the incident at Dana Bahn he'd had a list of those that needed to be carefully watched, but they were all lower level Elites or human contractors. He had never suspected his own brothers would so easily turn against him.

Raoul had warned him that the resentment over Riki ran deep, and Orphe had used that prejudice as a play for support. While Iason had Jupiter's full approval, and now even sported her colors, he knew that he needed to sort this mess out himself. Hiding behind Jupiter would be considered a weakness, and one thing he was not, was weak. Besides, he had his Blondie pride to consider.

Having been reinstated as the head of the syndicate, he could not allow anyone to undermine him. He had to walk a fine line of authority, without alienating the other Blondies further. This meant of course that he had to keep a tight watch on Riki as well.

His pet, no, his lover had been particularly obedient and even helpful in maintaining his status of a quiet, obedient pet, though he knew it was costing Riki dearly. Riki was not naturally submissive, and while Iason gave him practically free reign in the condo, outside he was still restricted.

He sometimes regretted bringing Riki back here, knowing how much the mongrel hated Eos, but he realized he would not be able to deal with all of this as effectively unless Riki was at his side. He didn't have to waste energy and resources wondering where Riki was or wanting him there, so he could focus more on his work.

When he scolded Raoul for not understanding what Riki was going through, it was because Riki considered himself trapped back here again. Granted, he had some heavy social pressures of his own to deal with, but he was still a Blondie and Jupiter's favored son, so nothing significant could ever be done to him. Still, he worried about Riki. Riki who was still visibly scorned and slighted whenever he went outside. He wanted to protect the young man that meant so much to him, and enable Riki to be more comfortable here. To do that he had to straighten out the mess in Tanagura that Orphe had left behind.

Now Riki was dealing with these new memories and trauma that Jupiter had awakened and Iason was frustrated that there was so little he could do. Aside from that one moment earlier in the afternoon yesterday, Riki had closed up about the subject of his father, and that concerned Iason. He'd never considered Riki's life, before taking him as his pet, and certainly never thought about Riki having any family that he might need to eventually deal with.

*I don't belong here.*

The anguish and uncertainty in Riki's voice yesterday had been disconcerting. It was evident that Riki was different from other mongrels, Iason had concluded that upon their first meeting, but he had never considered that he was not *Amoian*.

How had Riki come to be from another planet, and how had he ended up at Guardian? Ceres was already overpopulated with boys, which was why the institution had been created in the first place. Why would an orphanage that already had an overflowing capacity take on one more, especially from an outside source?

Scowling he sat up and glanced through the contacts in his console, finding Katze's number he instigated a link. It was late, but he knew the Black Market Dealer would still be awake.

"Yes, Iason?" The redhead greeted a second later. "How can I assist you?"

"I want you to look into Guardian."

Katze's eyebrows rose as he pulled the cigarette out of his mouth. "In what capacity?"

"Find out where they are getting their boys and let me know if there is any signs of off-world trafficking."

"I'll do what I can, but I can't imagine they would need to go that route. They have enough on their plate with the population of abandoned kids in Ceres."

“You were never in Guardian, were you?”

“No. I came from Jannin, to the west.”

Yes, Katze had come from one of the outlining villages; that had been on his paperwork when he became Furniture. Unlike most boys who did not retain much, if any, of their memories prior to learning to serve, Katze was fully aware of who he had been before becoming Furniture; perhaps that was what made him so very good at his current job.

“Just see what you can find out.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I have something.”

Iason nodded and when Katze didn’t sign off right away he asked. “Was there something you needed?”

“No.” Katze lowered his eyes for a moment then pulled them back to Iason. “I...was just wondering how things were going there?”

“It’s a mess, but I hope to have it sorted shortly.”

“Cal...” Katze snapped his mouth shut, then straightened. “That’s good to hear.”

“What about Cal?”

“It’s nothing. I will look into Guardian for you right away.”

“Katze.” Iason watched a look of discomfort flicker over the redhead’s face before it was replaced by his usual blank expression. The fact that he so rarely gave away his feelings was what made Katze an excellent underworld dealer. “Has something happened to Cal?”

“Not exactly and I gave my word not to tell you, only...”

“Only?”

“He’s...getting older.” Katze hoped that Iason would understand the subtle reference so that he would not have to break his promise to Cal outright. He was worried about the boy, who had been far too quiet lately, even for a Furniture. “Do you remember how I was at fourteen?”

Iason searched his memories backwards to find a young, growing and awkward boy. So, Cal had reached puberty. “I see.”

“He’s worried that he’s changed too much and that you won’t want him back.”

“Well, if he is anything like you were he will no longer be appropriate as Furniture,” Iason conceded and steeled his fingers.

“Will you redistribute him, as you did with me?”

“Do you think I should?”

“I can’t presume to know what you should do with him, Iason, he’s your Furniture.” Cal was also a very frightened and uncertain young man now and Katze understood that feeling all too well. “I could keep him here, working with me if that’s what you would prefer.”

“He is doing well there then?”

Katze nodded.

Riki wanted Cal back, this much Iason knew, and if he was honest with himself, he missed the boy as well. Bean was efficient but Riki was right, there was something lacking in the young Furniture. “Do you think Cal would accept that?”

“He will accept whatever fate you decide for him.”

“I am aware. However, I am asking your opinion. Do you think Cal would be...happy staying with you?”

Katze hesitated for a long while before answering, caught between a direct question from his master and his loyalty to Cal. It was the first time, in all



the years he had known Iason that the blondie seemed to actually be considering the feelings of another. It shocked him. Perhaps being with Riki had changed the Elite, although whether it was a good thing or not was still uncertain.

“No.”

“I see.” Well, that complicated matters, somewhat, Iason thought with an inner sigh.

He had promised to bring Cal back to Eos, but he had not anticipated the difficulty he would face in overturning Orphe’s law. Not only that, but should he choose to return Cal here, some might take it as another attempt to flout the rules and he had his hands full with the resentment others felt because of all the special treatment he had given Riki.

“We will both abide by whatever you decide, Iason,” Katze stated quietly. “I just thought I would give you a heads up.”

“Yes.” One more thing to worry about, one more problem to solve. Riki was right, they should have just stayed dead. He no longer had the ruthless drive for this sort of nonsense. “I appreciate that Katze. You should get some sleep, you look tired.”

Katze smirked. “This is my natural look; more sleep won’t really change anything.”

Iason chuckled, more out of reflex than amusement and signed off. He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes again. “We should have stayed at the beach house, pet.”

Hopefully he will have this all ironed out soon and they could get away somewhere, just the two of them. Perhaps they would even bring Cal to watch over things, assuming that he hadn’t become too gangly and awkward. Yes, that felt right. He would have to find some time to do that, somehow.

As for those that had so easily betrayed him, well, he couldn't terminate them because of Jupiter's rule, but there were other ways to deal with rats. Yes, indeed there were and once he had ousted all the vermin, he would get Tanagura back on track and restore his vision of what it should be.

A knock at his door had him straightening in his chair and he opened his eyes, assuming it was Bean. "Come."

The door opened and Riki stood there in just the shorts he usually wore to bed and a simple white T-shirt. "Are you busy?" he asked quietly.

Iason's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Yes. " He was always busy lately. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Riki crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door jam. "I couldn't sleep."

With a mind flooded by questions from the memory that Jupiter had awakened in him, he had been unable to settle. He couldn't rid himself of this feeling of unease, which seemed to grow worse the longer he lay in bed alone. Iason was working late, he did that more often now, and he hadn't wanted to disturb him, but he couldn't settle. Arguing with himself hadn't helped, nor had reading or fiddling with his data pad. He finally swallowed his pride and came to find the Blondie.

"Does your head hurt again?"

"No."

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

Iason watched Riki shift, once, twice, and noticed his eyes seemed to be looking everywhere except at him. "Are you lonely, perhaps?"

"No!"

Iason actually had to bite his lip to keep from smiling. He held out a gloved hand. "Come."

He watched as Riki hesitated long enough to show a meager flash of rebellion, then shoved off of the doorframe and walked to him, dropped his hands to his sides and curled his fingers into fists. Ah, his poor prideful mongrel, it was so difficult for him to ask for anything, even comfort.

"I'm disturbing your work."

"I only have a few more things to do, then was about to call it a night." Iason caught Riki's wrist and gently tugged him onto his lap. "I have a headache."

Riki started to rise. "I'll get you some..." His words were cut off as Iason trapped him in his arms and captured his mouth in a kiss that immediately had his body standing at attention.

"There." Iason gently licked Riki's lower lip as he ended the kiss. "All better."

"Idiot," Riki muttered, and tried to ignore the shimmer of pleasure that danced across his chest. He shifted slightly to get into a more comfortable position and glanced at the many computer screens on the far wall, amazed that Iason was able to read and process all of the information at once.

Iason kept one hand around Riki's waist as his other moved to type in some commands on his console. "I'm almost finished, and then we can go to bed, alright?"

"Okay." Riki leaned his head against Iason's shoulder and pulled some of the Blondie's hair into his fingers. That strange feeling had disappeared and he was suddenly so sleepy. "Can I help at all?"

"Not with this, but thank you." Iason continued to type one handed, faster than Riki could type with two. "I may have something you can help me with later, if you're interested." His eyes flickered over the screens, retaining the information instantly, weighing the variables and finding

several solutions. “It may be something a hacker like yourself finds beneath him...” He glanced down to catch Riki’s expression at his backhanded comment and found his pet sound asleep.

“So, you couldn’t sleep, could you?” With a smile, Iason ordered his data saved and shut down his console, then slowly rose, careful not to wake the beautiful young man in his arms. These little moments were fast becoming his favorite part of the day. Riki didn’t often seek him out, he had never done so before they were both nearly killed, but every now and then he did something completely out of character, and every time it pleased Iason so much he felt as if he was floating on air.

He stepped out of the office, moved across the living area and entered the lift that would take them to their bedroom, Riki never stirred. Once they arrived, Iason could see by the state of the sheets that Riki had indeed been tossing and turning. Carefully laying Riki on the bed, he restored the sheets to somewhat of an orderly fashion, then undressed.

Riki woke as the last of his clothing was being removed. “Iason?” he murmured as the Blondie tossed the shorts aside and smiled down at him.

“Yes, pet?”

“W’yor doin?”

Iason did so enjoy a sleepy Riki, although such vulnerability often inspired him to find new ways to wake Riki up, he knew the mongrel was exhausted so deliberately shut down his own arousal. “Coming to bed. What are you doing?” He watched, amused, as Riki’s drowsy eyes attempted to focus on him.

“Sleepin’...maybe.”

“Yes, I think so.” Iason slid in next to him and pulled the covers over them both. “Though you said you couldn’t sleep.”

“Mmhmm.” Instead of turning on his side to allow Iason to spoon behind him in their usual position, Riki leaned to the right and half fell across

Iason's chest while the Blondie was still on his back. "It's...okay...now."

Iason wrapped his arms around Riki and smiled as his pet half-heartedly fought to stay awake, but sleep was adamant about claiming him. "Why is it okay?" he asked softly, needing to know, to hear the answer and knowing Riki would never answer if he was fully awake.

"Here."

"Hmmm?"

"You're...here."

"Yes, and I'll stay right here beside you." Iason watched Riki's half-conscious fingers search and find a lock of blonde hair to cling to. "Always."

Iason lay his head on the pillow next to Riki and closed his eyes, preparing to shut down for the evening, when Riki whispered.

"Don't leave me."

Iason's eyes opened and he tightened his hold. "Never."

Riki's reply was ridiculously soft and almost incoherent as he started to slip back into his slumber, but Iason's keen hearing could still pick it out and he closed his eyes at the pleasure of it.

"And I you," he whispered, then one by one, set his processors on sleep mode.

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Riki paused at a candy vendor and looked over their selection, trying to find the type he'd nicked a couple of weeks ago. He didn't have to steal

anymore, of course, but he liked to stay in practice, plus old habits were hard to break, even after all this time. He never took anything expensive that he might get into serious trouble for, but only because that would reflect on Iason and he had promised to behave. Still, a little slight of hand here or there gave him a sense of satisfaction against the annoyingly condescending locals of EOS and their idiotic rules.

With Iason now spending full days and most evenings at his office and Bean hovering constantly, he was going stir crazy, so had decided to head to the square to loiter. It was lonely in the apartment with Iason gone so much; there was nothing to alleviate his boredom. He barely saw the Blondie lately, but he refused to admit that he actually missed him. Plus, spending so much time alone was causing him to dwell on what happened with Jupiter, and that was messing with his head.

“He’s overdoing it,” Riki decided aloud as he moved because the vendor had no other customers so there was no opportunity to grab anything. He moved further down the street, then paused at a stall of scarfs and sashes. “Just because he doesn’t have to sleep, doesn’t mean he doesn’t need sleep.”

“See anything you like?”

The question was almost too polite, and Riki could see the barely contained scorn in the vendor’s eyes. He no doubt didn’t want a pet pawing his things, but nor would he turn away a sale, especially to the pet of a very rich master.

“Nah, they all look like shit.” Riki dropped the scarf he had picked up and moved on, ignoring the vendor’s outraged stuttering.

He wished there was some way he could help Iason with his work, if for no other reason than to get it over and done with so they could get Cal back and he could maybe get out of Tanagura for a while. Iason promised they wouldn’t have to stay here for good, and Riki had to trust that he would keep that promise. Being a pet was a pain in the ass, even without receiving Iason’s giant dick up his own most nights. He hated the restrictions it placed on him, but he had given his word to behave. He realized, after the ordeal

with Orphe, that he had to stop playing the victim and accept half of the responsibility in their relationship. That wasn't an easy task, since he still had so little control over most things, but he could at least responsible for himself and understand what the consequences of his actions could have on Iason and their staying together.

“Are you searching for a gift?”

Riki glanced up into a pair of sparkling green eyes, so lost in his thoughts that he was unaware that he had stopped at a jewelry cart this time. “No!”

He snatched his hand away from the broach he was fingering.

The woman smiled. “Are you sure?” She picked up the oval shaped broach in pale gold, with a brilliant blue star sapphire in the center, surrounded by gems that were so pure white they almost blinded him, now that he looked at it properly. . “Are you sure? This is a one of a kind, you know, and would make an exceptional gift to someone.”

“One of a kind, huh?” Riki wasn't buying her story, although the gem in the broach was almost the same color as Iason's eyes. “How many one of a kinds do you have that look exactly the same then?”

“It's true. This was a specially commissioned piece for an Elite, but the client changed their mind and so I have to put it in with my regular stock.”

Riki's dark eyes drilled through her, watched her eyes widen in surprise and then...approval at being stared down so blatantly by a pet. “How much?”

“Only three thousand credits.”

“For this piece of crap?” Riki demanded, refusing to be fleeced and ready to start bargaining, but then he suddenly realized he was actually considering buying a gift for Iason. He never thought of doing that before...What the hell was wrong with him?

“This is made with one hundred percent Myrinaum!” she insisted.

“Myrinaum?” Riki sneered. “I can scrape that shit off the pipes in the toilet.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose. “It’s finely processed Myrinaum, not the dense material used for plumbing. It’s a much higher grade.”

“On what planet?” Still he knew that for Myrinum never lost its shine, which was why it was so often used for fixture. “Two hundred.”

She stared at him, horrified and amused at the same time. “The box for it costs more than that.” She pursed her lips. “Twenty- eight hundred.”

“Two fifty.”

“Have you no shame?” She put a hand to her heart, lowered her eyes. “You’d take the food out of my children’s mouths? Twenty- five hundred.”

Riki bit down on his lip to keep from grinning, this woman was definitely not a local of Tanagura. He looked at the broach, then touched his bracelet, thoughtfully. Maybe a gift wasn’t such a bad idea, it didn’t mean anything really have to mean anything. He was just repaying a debt, right? For when Iason rescued him from Orphe. He was just returning a favor, because he didn’t like owing anybody, and besides, that stone really was the same penetrating blue as Iason’s eyes.

“Three hundred.”

“Well, we’re up to the price of the clasp. Twenty-three hundred.”

They both jumped when the sign above her cart sparked suddenly, then started humming and flickering, effectively cutting off her advertisement and company name and replacing it with a simulated shadow video of some kind of animal’s rutting.

“Oh no! Not again!”

She set the broach back in the tray, then turned to the back table of her stall and hit the small console with the palm of her hand. The sign leaped, blipped and began flashing brilliant psychedelic colors that hurt the eyes.



She swore and hit the machine again, the sign went back to the matting rabbits.

Riki smirked. "Looks like you've got a problem with your sign."

"Oh! I've had a tech out to look at it twice and they claim to fix it, but some little bastard keeps hacking it again!"

He glanced down at the broach, considered pocketing it while she was distracted, but he'd already gained a little respect for her. Besides, he was having fun bargaining. "How much that cost ya?"

She paused in smacking her console and turned to him. "Excuse me?"

"How much did the tech cost?"

She opened her mouth to reply, then narrowed her eyes on him. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm pretty good with electronics. I bet I can fix it for you."

"You're a pet, right? What does a pet know about such things?"

Riki bristled, then willed himself to be calm because he suddenly really wanted that damn broach! "I wasn't always a pet, but..." He shrugged. "If you'd rather call a tech again, I guess we have nothing more to discuss."

She pursed her lips again and dropped her gaze to the broach. "Let me guess, you'll fix my sign for the cost of the cost of the broach?"

Again, he shrugged, but couldn't quite keep the grin from forming this time.

"No deal." She reached behind her console and hit the power switch. "I'll just turn it off until..." The sign, instead of switching off started to emit a high pitch whine that was starting to draw the attention of other people in the square. "Oh damn it! Off! Turn off!"

Riki turned his back to her, leaned against the cart and crossed his arms and ankles as he watched all the glares coming her way. "Security will come soon and shut you down."

“It won’t shut off!”

“Tell them that. What’s the fine for such a noise disturbance in EOS?”

The woman glared at him, frustrated, but a small smile also slipped across her lips. “Fix the sign and I’ll give you the broach for two thousand.”

“Nope.”

“Come on! Are you trying to rob me?”

Riki noticed two security droids headed toward them. “Here they come.”

“Oh for...Fifteen hundred!”

He turned. “Five hundred,” he declared. “And I’ll fix the sign and the console, plus set you up an impenetrable firewall that no hacker can get through, guaranteed.”

The vendor bit her lower lip, glanced at the approaching droids then back at Riki. “Deal, you arrogant sonofabitch! Fix it then!”

Riki grinned, hopped over the counter into the stall, picked up her console, turned it around and pulled out a small multi-tool from his pocket. He quickly removed the back casing and started fiddling with the wires.

“You are in violation...” One of the droids began.

“Two seconds!” Riki called as he rerouted the auxiliary control to another port, crossed two of the power coupling wires then snipped a third one. The sign fell blissfully silent.

“Sorry officers,” the vendor offered the droids. “It won’t happen again.”

After a moment’s contemplation as they assessed the data and uploaded it to the main server, the droids moved off.

“How did you do that?” she demanded looking over Riki’s shoulder as she watched him program something into his watch, then sealed the case back

onto the console.

“I’ll tell you for an extra two hundred off.”

She barked in laughter and slapped at his shoulder before she could help herself, then put her hands over her mouth. It was illegal to touch a pet without permission. “I...I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean...”

He smirked at her as he powered up the console and pulled her stool over to settle on. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“R...really?”

“Yeah.” His fingers flew over the key panel once the console was working again. “First, let’s get rid of this virus and the back door your hacker is using.”

“Can you really do that?”

“Sure.”

She watched him, completely ignorant of everything he was doing, but understanding that it had to be complicated. The code on the screen made no sense to her. “My name’s Carrie by the way.” She held out her hand to him, watched him glance from it to her face, before slowly shaking it.

“Riki.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He sighed and went back to his programing. “Is that why you jacked up the price so much?” he demanded, feeling the spark of anger. “Because Iason’s rich?”

“No, I really wanted to sell it for that much, no matter who it was too.” She glanced over her shoulder and noticed a few other vendors, and even some of the pets wandering the square were watching them intently. “Will this get us into trouble?”

He shrugged. "Who knows? I can't keep up with all the rules in the damn place."

Carrie watched a security officer wander over to them, a man this time, not a droid.

"Is there a problem here?" he demanded, glaring at Riki.

"No, no problem. This kind young man offered to fix my sign for me, that's all."

"Oh? Did he receive permission to do this?"

"P...permission?"

"He's a pet, miss. He isn't allowed to offer any..." The guard sneered at Riki. "Services to anyone without his master's permission."

Riki's hands stilled, his spine stiffened and he bit his lip hard enough to draw blood to prevent the angry retort that rose up in his throat.

"I...n...no I didn't get permission."

Riki rose slowly. "It's my fault," he stated. "I jumped behind before she could stop me and I forgot to..." He swallowed the foul taste that rose in his mouth. "Ask." He couldn't force the word permission through his lips.

The guard waved at Riki, indicating he come out from behind the stall. "You best come with me and we'll go see your master."

Riki slid his legs back over the front counter. "I don't need an escort."

"Well, you're getting one." The man touched the wand at his side. "Move mongrel."

Riki's hands curled into fists and he avoided looking at Carrie. "Whatever." He turned on his heel and stormed off quickly enough that the guard had to rush to catch up.

Carrie watched them go, unsure what she could have or should have said in his defense. She flinched as her sign hummed and came back on, clear and perfect with her scrolling advertisement. He had even added a beautiful flashing border to it and a soft tune that was both soft yet enticing.

“Oh my. That’s better than it’s ever been.” She glanced down the square again, helplessly as Riki and the guard disappeared among the crowd, then gasped and looked down at the sapphire broach in her tray. “Well, damn it.”

Riki slouched on the bench outside of Iason’s office and crossed his arms over his chest. FUCK! Why couldn’t these bastards just leave him alone? He wasn’t doing anything wrong and to top it off he never even got the damn broach! This was what he got for trying to do something nice. He glared at the closed door in front of him and his temper grew hotter by the minute. The Guard had insisted on ‘explaining’ the situation to Iason in person, and to make matters worse, he’d seen Raoul in there with him when the guard entered.

This wasn’t fair! He’d done everything he could do to remain off their damn radar, and the one time he forgot to consider...He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

When the door opened, he refused to rise, simply out of principle. The guard exited, looking smug and Raoul was right behind him, looking surprisingly sympathetic.

“He wants to see you.”

Riki rose slowly and tried to bury the anxiety rising inside of him. He hadn’t been in trouble in a long time; would Iason actually punish him?

“I wouldn’t keep him waiting if I were you.”

Riki shot Raoul a look that would freeze meat. “Fuck you,” he growled and stormed into the office. He closed the door with a decided slam, nearly in Raoul’s face, then turned, prepared for battle.

Iason sat in his office chair, his fingers steepled, his eyes pinned to Riki's every movement. "What were you thinking?"

"What does it matter? I fucked up, okay? What do they expect this time? Do they want Bean to drag my naked ass through the streets while I'm shackled?"

"As appealing as that might be, I don't believe the consequences will be quite so severe."

Riki almost stumbled; he'd been raring for a fight, prepared to rage and swear and rebel and do whatever he could to retain his pride. What the hell? "What do you mean? Aren't you gonna punish me?"

Iason sighed, rubbed his temple and turned to his console. "I haven't time for it. Just go home, Riki."

Riki felt as if he had been slapped. That was it? Wasn't Iason going to grope him, fuck him into submission? Wasn't he going to lecture him, or say he was disappointed? "What the fuck?"

"Please don't use such language here. Go home, Riki. I'm busy."

Something definitely wasn't right. This wasn't like Iason at all. He took a step towards the blondie, then pulled back again. Iason looked tired. Iason never looked tired and Riki realized that this interruption would probably cause him to stay late at the office again. He felt bad about that, but even worse, was the idea that Iason so angry he didn't even want to look at him. Why did that make his heartache and his stomach cramp? Reluctantly he opened the door, stepped out, and then before he closed it whispered.

"I'm sorry."

Iason looked up, startled just as the door quietly clicked closed. "Riki." He rose and moved to the door, but by the time he opened it Riki had disappeared. Sighing again, he returned to his work.

## Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is still dealing with his guilt and confides in Shiao

“Riki!”

Guy awoke with a cry as his heart tried to leap through his chest. It took him a moment to realize that he wasn't back in his tiny apartment in Ceres, listening to Riki coldly discuss how Iason Mink knew all of his good spots.

The dream had morphed from there to Riki being tied to some sort of cross and being whipped and beaten by Iason Mink. Guy had tried to help, tried to rescue him, but Riki's dark eyes turned on him with such vicious hate that he had stumbled back and fallen into a pit where Riki and Iason stared down at him ruthlessly. The dream had gotten steadily worse from there, as he was ripped limb from limb by a pack of wild dogs, and all the while, the pair watched from above and smiled.

Running a hand through his hair, he tossed the covers back and slid his feet to the floor. Why couldn't he get rid of these damn nightmares? He'd thought he had accepted that what he had done had caused Riki to hate him, but he couldn't stop wanting to protect his friend. He couldn't stop wanting to rescue him.

With a shuddering breath, he rose and pulled on a pair of jeans, then stepped out of his room and wandered to the kitchen. His throat was parched, as if he'd been left for days in the desert. He had just poured himself a glass of juice when the kitchen light turned on. He blinked from the sudden brightness.

“Are you unwell?” Shiao asked, tying the sash of his long, silken robe.

“No. Just needed a drink.”

Shiao crossed to him, lay two long, pale fingers against Guy's cheek. "You're warm. Do you feel ill?"

Guy was shocked to find himself actually turning into the touch, and appalled he stepped back and turned away to drink his juice. "It's nothing."

"You screaming."

"Huh?"

"You were screaming, quite horrifically. I was just coming to check on you."

Guy lowered his head and stared at the Kitchen Island rather than look at the tall Onyx behind him. "It was...I was having a nightmare, I guess."

"They seem to be coming more frequently lately."

Guy stared into his glass, then tossed the contents back and set the glass on the counter. "Sorry, I'll try and keep it down."

"Guy." Shiao caught Guy's arm. "Are we not friends, as you said?"

"Huh? Yeah, I mean. Sure."

"Then as friends, we should discuss this issue you have, should we not?"

Guy shook his head. "It's fine. It's my problem."

Shiao released him and reached into the cabinet for two new glasses. "Come. If you are going to drink, at least make it a worthy beverage."

Guy watched Shiao step down from the kitchen and cross the living area, before hesitantly following.

Shiao called for lights then selected a decanter from the bar closet and settled on the sofa. He poured them each a generous portion of blue liquid, then patted the space beside him. "Let's talk."



“I really don’t need to...” Guy began, but sat and accepted the glass.

“You obviously do, or you would not be having these disturbing dreams.”

“It’s just because of shit in my past. It has nothing to do with you and I can’t change it, so talking about it won’t do anything.”

“This has to do with your friend, from before then? The one who died?”

“He...” Guy rubbed his hands over his face. “He isn’t really dead.”

“Oh?”

Fuck it. Guy downed the liquor, hissed at it burned all the way down, then proceeded to tell Shiao everything, from how he and Riki had grown up, to Iason Mink making Riki his pet and he even confessed what he had done to Riki in order to free him.

When it was all said and done, Guy was surprised to find that a weight had lifted from his heart. There was the chance that Shiao would report him for attempting to steal an Elite’s pet, and for his attempt to kill Iason, but he didn’t care anymore. He needed to trust someone, even if it was an Elite. He had no one else.

“So, this person was your mating partner?” Shiao asked as poured Guy another drink. “How did he end up with Iason?”

“I don’t fucking know. Riki was itching to get out of Ceres, had been talking about it killing him or suffocating him or something a few days before he disappeared, but I never thought he’d...” Guy shook his head. “No. No, he wouldn’t have made that choice willingly, not Riki. You have to understand pride to Riki was all he had. There’s no way he’d let himself become some Blondie’s pet just as a way to escape the slums.”

“Yet, it appears he did just that.”

“Iason had to have taken him, forced him, and tortured him.”

“You seem very sure of this, yet you have no facts that such a thing took place.”

“I *know* Riki. I don’t need facts.”

“Alright.” Shiao sipped his drink and crossed one long leg over the other. “Assuming that Iason did capture and torture your friend for his own benefit, there is little that can be done about it. As an Elite, he has the right to take anyone as a pet.”

“I know the fucking law!”

“Then you had to know that there was nothing you could do about it.” Except to attempt to kill a Blondie. That it itself was a crime that warranted death, and Shiao felt uncomfortable knowing about it. However, since Mink seemed to wish it kept quiet, he would do the same. “And as you say, your friend chose to return to his Master. There must be a reason for that choice.”

“I know!” Guy set his glass down and hung his head in his hands. “I know, I just...I just...” His arms curled around his stomach as that familiar gut-wrenching pain filled him; that awful mixture of love and guilt because of what he had done to Riki. “I love him. I love him so much and...I don’t care that he doesn’t love me back, but...to...to be a pet. God, for Riki to be a pet it...” Guy shook his head and bit his lip until he tasted blood.

Shiao regarded Guy quietly. “I could make you forget about him. You did once before, it can be done again.”

“No!”

“Then what can be done? You cannot continue to hold onto someone who is not yours, one who has chosen not to be yours.”

“I could if I was a fucking Blondie!”

Shiao smirked. “Yes, but you are not a Blondie.” He put a cupped Guy’s chin, lifted to see the mongrel’s tear-stained face. “Tell me how to help you, Guy. I wish to stop your suffering.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you care about the feelings of a kid from the slums?”

Shiao seemed to reflect on the question. “You have always been honest with me. You have always treated me with respect without diminishing your own pride and you accepted my help when you needed it. Are those not reasons enough?”

Guy stared into the Onyx’s eyes. “I don’t understand. What do you really want from me?”

“As I have said, to assist me with the cycles and to be my companion.”

“There has to be more to it. No one wants something for nothing, especially not an Elite, so tell me what do you want?”

“Would it be easier for you to hear that I wish to turn you into a pet, or a Furniture? That I intend to sell you off to the highest bidder if you disappoint me?”

Guy paled, but held Shiao’s gaze stubbornly. “It would make more sense than what you’re telling me.”

Shiao nodded and released him. “I suppose to a mongrel it would.” He sighed and rose. “Please, do not judge all Elites by Iason Mink. While we are all Jupiter’s children, we also have our own personalities and values. I have heard the rumors of Iason and his pet, the things they do and it... baffles me. I cannot imagine having such a relationship with anyone, especially a Human.”

“So, you’ve never thought of me that way?” Is that why Shiao had always been content with just companionship and the occasional bathing rituals? “You don’t get turned on my boys? You’re not like the others, is that what you’re saying?”

“Not at all.” Shiao glanced over his shoulder at Guy. “You have a beautiful and fit body, and but it is very different than the kind that is expected for a pet. Still, I will not deny that I have wondered what you might look like, naked, stroking yourself or being mounted by another, simply because for my kind that is how we stimulate ourselves.” He moved to the windows, looked out. “I will not deny it, but I would never ask it, Guy. Do you understand the difference?”

Guy wasn’t sure how to respond. So, did that mean that Shiao was attracted to him, in a perverse sort of way? He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, but it didn’t disgust him as much as he thought it would. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t used his body often enough to get what he wanted while living in Ceres.

Sex was the currency in the Slums, since they rarely had anything else worth trading. Riki understood that, and even when they became pairing partners, there would be times that either or both of them would have to trade off their bodies or sexual favors. The only one Guy had ever had any interest in making love with was Riki, but they both did what they had to.

He regarded Shiao and wondered why the Onyx didn’t have a pet now to stimulate him. Why was he settling for just a mongrel companion?

“Have...have you ever?” he asked and immediately wished he could retract the question. What the hell was he saying?

Shiao turned to him. “Have I ever what?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

He walked over, caught Guy’s chin and lifted his head so they could meet each other’s eyes. “Tell me. Let there be no more secrets between us.”

“I just...You said you’ve imagined me...doing things. I’m just wondering um...why you don’t...”

“Don’t?”

“Have a pet!” Guy finished quickly and flushed.

“I did have one, many years ago, and I grew quite fond of him. He was a lovely creature, always smiling, very sweet and affectionate.”

“What happened? Did you sell him off when he got too old?”

“No. He died.”

Guy lifted his gaze, startled to see something akin to sadness in Shiao’s eyes. “How?”

“He had a defective heart. The pre-medical scans did not catch it and by the time they did there was nothing that could be done.”

“When did you find out?”

“I’d had him just about six months.”

“And then he just died?”

“No, he had an attack of sorts, and that was when we learned of his defect. I was furious at first, to find out that I’d been sold damaged goods, but...”

“But?” Guy prompted and swallowed his bitterness at the Onyx’s description of a child.

“But Terian looked me in the eye, while he was hooked up to all those monstrous machines, no doubt in considerable pain, and with smile told me to send him back and demand a refund.”

“Did you?”

“No. No I didn’t because there was something about that child that...” Shiao shook his head and rose, settled back on the sofa and picked up his drink. “The idea that he could joke, or at least attempt to joke was disconcerting. That he was willing to return to a dealer where he knew that no one else would purchase him because he was now damaged goods, caused me to reconsider.”

“So...what happened?”

“I dealt with the dealer.” Shiao lifted his glass, stared at the liquid. “Then I took Terian home and we spent his last days together.”

“You...kept him?”

“Yes. He was mine to the very end, and he seemed very happy about it. I too, was content with his company.” Shiao smiled. “He was such a funny little thing. He would dress up in frilly clothing and put on plays for me, before his attack, and even after, he managed a couple of shows. And he was smiling and he liked to sleep next to me, curled into my chest.” Shiao sipped his drink thoughtfully. “I often miss that simple warmth of his body next to mine. I have tried other things to replicate it, but it is never the same.”

Guy’s vision blurred, he never thought an Elite capable of such emotion, or of treating anyone with such affection. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Yes well, after he died I just couldn’t make myself get another one.”

Guy wanted to ask for more details, since he still had no real idea what a pet was for an Elite. He had heard rumors that the Elites were voyeurs and liked to watch their pets fuck other pets, but beyond that, he had no frame of reference. He only knew that it wasn’t, shouldn’t be something that Riki would want to return to.

Shiao seemed lost in his own thoughts, and so Guy decided not to press for more. It was the first time he had seen an Elite even close to showing a real emotion, except for the anger and rage he had experienced with Iason.

“Is that why you asked me to come work for you?” he asked instead. “Because you were lonely?”

Shiao blinked, surprised. “I suppose if I were to put a name to what I felt after Terian died that might be it, but no. I asked because I found you interesting. I don’t need you to occupy my time or thoughts to keep me from slipping into some sort of despair; we Elites simply don’t work that

way. Terian was a lovely pet but he is gone now. There is nothing else to be done.”

“How do you deal with it?” Guy murmured, because he missed being next to Riki every night and it was getting worse instead of better.

“Deal with what?”

“I mean, how do you stop from...missing him? His warmth?”

Shiao set his glass down and looked at Guy, intently. “Is that what this is about? You are missing the closeness and warmth of your friend?”

Whether because someone was actually listening to him, or because the feeling he had been trying so hard to bury was verbalized aloud, all the wretchedness and despair that Guy had been fighting against bubbled to the surface and his eyes flooded with tears.

“I...” He tried to speak but only a sob formed and a moment later, he felt strong arms wrap around him.

“You are truly lonely for him, aren’t you?” Shiao held the muscular mongrel as he sobbed uncontrollably. “I cannot understand this feeling you have, but I will stay with you until it passes.”

“I...I just...What I did was...Why? Why did I do that? He’s my b...best friend and I...He hates me. I...I hate that he hates me!”

Shiao caressed Guy’s hair, and found he missed the longer style the mongrel used to wear. He’d cut his tail off the day after they left Amoi and seemed to prefer keeping it short now.

“Is it only forgiveness you seek?” he asked gently. “Or do you wish things to be as they once were?”

Guy shook his head. He knew they could never go back. Riki had made that clear when they had been in Orphe’s compound. His friend had chosen Iason. “He...He said he loves him.”

“Who?”

“R...Riki. He said he loves Mink.”

“Ahh.” Shiao nodded. A pet often fell in love with its Master, however it was always a one side affair. An Elite could not love, it was the one emotion that Jupiter had not allowed them. Therefore, regardless of how the mongrel felt, his feelings would not be returned. “If his choice is made nothing you do will change it, Guy.”

Guy pulled away, and wiped his face, embarrassed. He couldn't remember the last time he had cried like that. Well, maybe when Riki had left the second time after confessing he was a pet; but still it had been a while. “I know that.”

“But you cannot accept it?”

“I have!” Guy dropped his head into his hands. “I...I thought I had. I'm trying too.”

“Perhaps the reason you cannot is because you require closure.”

Guy glanced at Shiao. “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps there are feelings you need to express to your friend, feelings you need to have rebuffed or reciprocated to fully accept things as they are?”

“He won't talk to me. He said he never wanted to see me again.”

“Send him a message on link. I am sure that I can find Mink's address.”

“He'd just delete it,” Guy refused, and then possibly Iason would track the message back here and that would cause trouble for Shiao.

“A note then.”

“A note?”



“Yes. I have gratuity notepaper that I use for some of my clients. They are always thrilled to receive something hand written, given that it’s such an antiquated form of communication now.”

“I don’t think...”

“It is overthinking things that has landed you in this predicament.” Shiao rose. “Wait right there.”

Guy watched him leave and then reached for his drink. He downed the liquid in one gulp, appreciated the slow burn that traveled from his throat all the way to his navel. He’d been a messenger in the early days, before he met Riki, running messages back and forth to people, and receiving food or clothing or what not for it. Those had always been verbal because data pads were nearly impossible to get in Ceres and any other sort of communication was unheard of.

Shiao returned with a small square box and settled next to Guy again. “This will do nicely.” He opened the box and inside were a section of colored note cards and a handsome looking pad of bound paper.

“What is this?”

Shiao set the pad on the accent table and handed Guy a tall thin instrument. “Write him a letter.”

Guy stared dubiously at the pen in his hand, and then made a small mark along the paper. Okay, so it was similar to the pre-writers he had at Guardian when he was a kid. “Huh.”

“Do you know how to write?”

“Yeah, I learned in school, but it’s been awhile.” And they had never used such fancy writing instruments, just a white pointed led against an erasable tablet.

“Good.” Shiao picked up his glass and rose again. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

“Wait!” Guy caught the Onyx’s hand. “What...what should I say?”

“Pour all your thoughts and questions into it. Tell him how sorry you are and ask for forgiveness.”

“But...What’s the point? He’ll never get it.”

“We’ll find a way to deal with that after you write the letter.” Shiao dropped his hand on Guy’s shoulder, squeezed. “I am going back to bed. Good luck.”

Guy watched him leave then looked back at the notepaper. A letter, telling Riki how he felt. Would it really make any difference? Well, he supposed he had nothing to lose. Slowly, he put the pen to the pad and began to write.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey everyone, I know not all of you like Guy, but I needed to get this chapter out of the way to set up a conflict with Iason and Riki further down the road. If i had added it with the following chapter it would have been way too long.

The next chapter will be all Riki and Iason with some serious together time as well as showing their continued growth. (Riki has asked that I not use the word 'cuddle' so I said 'together' instead. He is so easily embarrassed considering he is such a hard ass!)

In return, I hope you will all take a moment to comment and let me know if you like the direction this is taking. \*shamelessly begs for reviews- I am not above such things :-) \*

## Chapter 9

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki and Iason finally get some one one one time.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I am glad so many of you like Carrie, she will figure a little more prominently in the story. As promised, a nice long, slightly fluffy chapter. Iason and Riki finally get to be alone together and it gets a little hot and heavy. **WARNING\_ CONTAINS GRAPHIC/MATURE SCENES!** If you do not like this or are under age **DO NOT READ!**

Moments of pure Saccharine goodness, so please remember to floss after reading. And as always, please, please review. (Iason says that he will let Riki have a treat if you do!)

Iason entered his condo just as the sun was rising the following morning and handed his cloak to Bean when the Furniture appeared in front of him.

"Shall I fix you a meal, sir?"

"Later." Iason's body did not suffer from the human traits of exhaustion, but his organic mind was beyond weary. "Where is Riki?"

"He is in your room, sir. He was up late drinking and smoking, but refused food. He retired about four hours ago."

"I see." Iason had been worried about how Riki had left his office yesterday, but he'd been too preoccupied to follow at the time. "What was the last thing he ate?"

"Breakfast yesterday morning, Sir. I did warn him he would be punished if he did not eat his required intake. Shall I fetch the wand?"

Iason looked down at Bean coldly. "Why would I need the wand?"

"To punish the pet, sir. You advised that I must leave all punishments to your discretion, or else I would have resolved the matter earlier and not bothered you with this."

"I will deal with Riki, your job is simply to report such matters to me. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm going to bed. We'll both eat when we get up."

"Yes, Sir."

Iason moved across the living room and pulled off his gloves as he stepped into the lift. The moment he entered his bedroom he spotted Riki curled up asleep in the bed and immediately noticed the unusual pallor of Riki's beautiful skin. Quickly disrobing he lifted the sheets and was both surprised and pleased to find that Riki was naked beneath them; the young man usually wore shorts to bed unless they had just finished making love.

Had Riki expected him to come home earlier? Had he been upset enough to put him off his food? Had it also caused him trouble getting to sleep? Was he still plagued by the memories of his father or was there more on his mind?

Slipping in beside Riki, he immediately pulled the sleeping mongrel into his arms and scowled. Riki had lost weight! This would not do.

"Iason?"

"I'm here."

Riki's eyes opened and he shifted in Iason's arms, then lowered his eyes from the Blondie's penetrating gaze. "Are you... still mad?"

Mad? Was Riki still dwelling on the incident earlier? It had wounded him the way Riki had left, and he'd known he'd been unforgivably abrupt, but he truly had no time for such foolishness. He didn't blame Riki, he blamed that idiot guard for interrupting him with something so unnecessary.

"No. Why would you think that?"

"I screwed up." Riki stared at Iason's chest, his fingers itched to touch the smooth skin before him, but his pride caused him keep his arms stiffly at his side. "I caused you more problems, didn't I?"

"No." Iason pulled Riki closer so their skin touched, and affectionately dropped a kiss on the top of his head. "Although, you do need to be more careful. You know that there are people watching us. We can't give them any ammunition to use against us."

"I know. I wasn't thinking. I was just so bored and..." And lonely. He had been so desperately lonely and that was why he had gone to the marketplace. "I'm glad you're..." Home! It shocked him how relieved he felt having Iason hold him again. "Not mad," he muttered.

"No." Iason gave him a little squeeze. "Bean says you haven't been eating."

Fucking tattletale. "I guess."

"Why?"

Because he was tired of eating alone, mostly, but instead of saying that he just shrugged.

Iason caught Riki's chin and lifted it so the young mongrel would finally meet his gaze. "I've been neglecting you, haven't I?"

Yes! "It's fine. I can take care of myself."

"You had better *not* be taking care of yourself." Iason slid his fingers between them and pulled Riki's arm over his waist, knowing that Riki was still reluctant in such things. His lover would willingly, sometimes eagerly, submit to sex, but he seemed to struggle with even the simplest gesture of affection.

Riki grunted. The no masturbating rule still applied, although he was relatively sure that he wouldn't get really punished if he broke it. It was more an accepted fact that Iason wanted all of his pleasure and so Riki

conceded to that. Besides, it always felt better with Iason's touch than his own.

Iason brushed his fingers through Riki's hair. He so adored this sometimes annoyingly independent Human, but he knew that despite Riki's bravado, his lover was easily bored. However, it had never occurred to him that Riki might actually miss him and want the company. Although, Riki sought him out the other day when he couldn't sleep, so Iason was aware that their relationship was changing.

Iason had been insanely busy lately, neglecting Riki and their home life and all social activity so that he could get things where he needed them to be. He wanted to be able to step away for a day or two, to take Riki away for a while as a reward for the boy's patience, but the more he accomplished the more things he uncovered that needed his attention. It was a never-ending cycle.

It hadn't been this way before because he had worked hard to set up an impenetrable network of associates that allowed him to know what everyone was doing and how. He had also gained a ruthless reputation that discouraged most from even considering going against him. While he was still Jupiter's favored son, and there were still several people who either respected him or feared him, thanks to Orphe there were just as many who wanted him gone from Tanagura.

"Shall we run away together?" he whispered in Riki's ear and wondered if the mongrel was even aware of the small pattern of circles that his fingers were currently making on Iason's back as he played with his hair.

"Yeah."

"Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere that's not here."

Iason wished they could just fly away from here. He ran his fingers sensually up and down Riki's arm and "How about Tanus Twelve?"

"Too cold."

"Pyrothan?"

"Too hot."

"Numburse Arcada?"

"Worms. Big ones."

Iason chuckled. "You don't care for worms?"

"Who the hell likes giant worms?"

"You're so difficult."

"Fuck..." Riki began tossing his head back to glare at Iason only to fall into the Blondie's trap as his mouth was captured in an intoxicating kiss.

Iason gently pushed Riki onto his back as his lips marked a sensuous train around Riki's throat, past his neck and shoulders and then tasted his chest.

"Nggh!" Riki arched as Iason lapped at his left nipple and felt the spike of desire shoot all the way to his groin.

"I will take you away from here," Iason murmured as he slid his hand between them to stroke Riki's arousal. "We'll go somewhere warm, with plenty of trees and an ocean so you can swim like you did at the beach house. Would you like that?"

"Y...yeah." Riki was having a hard time concentrating on Iason's words because his body was more interested in what the Blondie's hands and mouth was doing. It had only been a few days since they'd last had sex, but it felt so much longer. "Sounds...ahh...g...good." So good! Iason could make him feel so damn good!

"And we can stroll the museums and eateries together."

"Mmmhmmmm." Riki's eyes fluttered closed as Iason's mouth moved lower, and lower.

"And shop." Iason licked the tip of Riki's cock, smiled as he watched his lover fist the sheets beneath them. "Shall we go shopping, pet? Will you allow me to buy you something?"

Why the hell were they still talking about this? When Iason stopped and lifted his head to look down at him, Riki almost cried with frustration. "Whatever!" he growled.

"Will you let me buy you anything I want to?"

"Anything!" Riki's eyes opened and he glared at Iason. "Stop fucking teasing me!"

Iason smiled. "Ah, but I adore teasing you," he slid Riki's cock into his mouth and sucked lovingly, pleased with Riki's hips lifted off the bed. Usually Riki was able to keep relatively still, as he was trained to, but his mongrel was obviously in a bad way, so Iason decided to go easy on him and quickly brought him to climax.

"Want...I want..." Riki panted.

"Yes," Iason murmured and closed his eyes as his mouth filled with the salty taste of Riki's seed.

He sucked Riki dry then lifted his gaze to stare down at his sated lover. Riki's skin was flushed and glistening with a thin layer of sweat. His eyes were half closed and his mouth parted as he tried to catch his breath.

"Are you trying to sleep?" Iason asked as he traced his finger across Riki's lovely, sensuous lips.

"Y...yes."

"No." He gently pried Riki's lips open a little further and slid two fingers inside. "We're not done yet."



"P...pervert," Riki mumbled but obediently sucked on the android's fingers, knowing what Iason intended to do with them and felt his himself harden again instantly.

Feeling some of his energy, and a spark of devilment return, Riki held Iason's searing gaze as he wrapped his hand around Iason's fingers, while he licked and sucked the digits in his mouth. He watched the dark arousal cloud Iason's gaze, turning his ice blue eyes to the color of a stormy sea.

"No," Iason repeated deliberately as he pulled his fingers out of Riki's mouth with a quiet pop, and immediately used them to prepare Riki's entrance. "Neither of us will be sleeping for some time yet."

Bring it, Riki wanted to cry, but he was too involved in the sensations flooding his body. This was what he wanted, to be with Iason, to be touched by Iason. God! What was this feeling filling his chest? Such a warm, yet exciting feeling that made his heart throb so thrillingly.

When Iason entered him it was like coming home and Riki almost wept. Why was this so intense? It had only been a few days, he'd gone longer without Iason's touch, and yet he was feeling things now he had never experienced before.

"M...more," he moaned as Iason slowly thrust into him, then out again. In and then out. "Nnnghh! I...Iason!" He needed more, needed Iason to go deeper and but he couldn't verbalize it. His pride wouldn't allow it.

Riki had often begged for release, or for Iason to stop when he was physically exhausted, but this was the first time his pet had asked for more.

"Oh, Riki," Iason murmured as he lowered his head to capture Riki's gasping mouth while he thrust faster and harder into him. "Is this what you want?" he murmured against Riki's lips, delighted that Riki was just as desperately returning the kiss. "Is this more?"

"Yes!" Riki's arms slid up around Iason's neck. "That! Like...tha..." His words were swallowed by Iason's tongue plunging into his mouth as the Blondie's cock plunged into his body. Yes! Yes! God!

Iason was already close, another first, for it usually took him some time to work up to an orgasm. Perhaps he had not only neglected Riki but his own needs as well. He suddenly wrapped his arms around Riki and flipped them, so that Riki was on top.

"W...what?" Riki asked, still in a passionate daze.

"I'm tired, love. Can you do the rest?"

They had never done it in this position before, Riki had assumed Iason would feel less in control if they did, and yet here he was asking. Trying to push his own need aside, Riki stared down at Iason.

"You're pretty tired, huh?"

"No, not in the sense you get tired. Why?"

"You seem tired."

Iason smirked. "Do I?"

"Yeah. You should sleep."

"I should, should I?"

"Yeah. Even the great Iason Mink needs down time. If you rest things will seem clear in the morning, right?"

"That is usually true, yes." Iason was touched by Riki's concern, even as he slid his hands around Riki's narrow waist, lifted the mongrel and then let him drop. Riki gasped in shock and pleasure as he was impaled all the way to the hilt. "Neither of us can sleep in this state."

"No, but....Ahhh!" Riki braced his hands on Iason's chest as the Blondie's rod speared him a second time. "God! Stop that!"

"Why should I stop?"

"You're tir...Fuuck!" Riki cried out on the third.

"Are you going to help or can you only sit there?" Iason challenged and watched the flash of pride darken Riki's eyes.

"Bastard," he hissed, braced his hands again on Iason's chest and began to move. He could do this! He'd done this plenty of times, he was actually quite good at this; or he used to be. "Think...you're...so....Hot!"

Iason watched hypnotized as Riki's stubbornness turned to an unrelenting passion and determination and was startled to find the feel and sight of vigorously riding him was almost too much to bear. He was close, he was ridiculously close all ready and he was mildly alarmed that when he tried to pull back and regain control, he couldn't.

Iason linked his hands with Riki to help stabilize his lover's movements and they were both swept over the edge a moment later. Riki collapsed atop him, panting. Iason curled his arms around Riki, closed his eyes at the feel of Riki's heart thumping hard against his own chest.

Riki shifted off Iason and plopped down against the cool sheets, felt Iason almost immediately spoon behind him, then hesitantly entwined his fingers with Iason's. "So, sleep."

Iason smiled as he pulled Riki's hair away from his face so he could see the younger man's profile better. "Is that what you want?" He wanted to make love to Riki again, to make up for recent neglect, but he had to admit his mind was still too full to give Riki his complete attention.

Riki couldn't deny that he could go another round and his body was already reacting to Iason's closeness, mostly because it was trained to. They never did it just once.

He lay his head on the pillow. "We're both tired," he deflected quietly, because he did want Iason to touch him, to make him feel the way only Iason could make him feel, but he was willing to wait. "If you're good, *maybe* you'll get lucky in the morning."

"That *would* be lovely." Iason chuckled and actually *snuggled* into Riki. He waited until he felt Riki completely relax on his way to sleep before he

whispered. "Let's bring Cal home tomorrow." He waited, calculated that it took Riki exactly forty-three point two seconds to fully comprehend what he'd just said.

"What?" Riki bolted upright and stared down at Iason, incredulously. "You... You over turned the law?"

"No, that still requires some work." Four of his brothers were still refusing to veto the Furniture Age rule that Orphe had decreed and he had to have all twelve votes to overturn the law. Since they refused to listen to reason, he would have to find something to blackmail them with, which would take more time.

"Then....how can he come home? If he comes back to Tanagura he'll be killed!"

Iason sat up and caressed Riki's cheek. "Do you think I would allow that to happen?"

"I...no, but then how..."

"I've changed his registry."

"Changed it?"

"Yes. He is no longer Furniture."

Riki stared at Iason, dumbfounded. "You're freeing him?"

"No. We have discussed this before, if I freed him, Cal would have no where to go."

Riki scratched his head, now completely alert. "I don't get it. You just said he was no longer Furniture."

"That is correct."

"Then what the hell is he gonna be?"

"My ward."

Riki gaped at him. He'd heard of kids being adopted of course, but it so rarely happened that it was more an urban myth than an actual thing that happened. He had never heard or read of an Elite adopting a mongrel, and Cal was a mongrel because he was also from Guardian.

"C...can you do that?"

"In the past Elites often adopted children as a show of their Humanity."

It had all been a farce of course; the children had been adopted to prove to others that Elite's were good and generous beings that cared for Humans. It had been intended as little more than a PR scheme, but then the Elite's found they could use the children for observation purposes so that they could become more Human-like in their own behaviours.

As the children matured, however, they became rebellious and problematic, as Humans tended to do. The Elite's attempted to coerce them with material goods and rewards, but it didn't always work, and so they developed the Furniture Law, which was to remove the memories of the child at a young age, and program them to obey. This led to a much more structured society, for the benefit of the Elites. It was still some time after that before the idea of children as pets came into play, of course.

"It is an ancient law, but a law nonetheless."

"What about the other Blondies?"

"Ah, well, they can hardly criticize against it since they are stubbornly holding to their position on the Furniture Age Law. It may cause a few waves, but unfortunately I cannot think of another way to bring Cal back to Tanagura." Jason ran his fingers through Riki's hair. "And you do want him back, do you not?"

Riki nodded. "So, does that mean...if something happens to you, Cal gets... I mean, everything is left to Cal?"

"No. Our laws do not work that way. Being my ward simply gives him the status of belonging to me and the ability to live in my home and use my name and credit. It is not so different from being a Furniture, only he would not be expected to have the same duties as one."

"Cal might be upset if he can't serve as he did before though, didn't you say? Being a Furniture is who and what he is."

"Well, that will be left to you. You'll have to help him adjust and come up with ways for him to feel useful."

"Why me?"

"Because you are the one who wants him back the most, aren't you?"

Riki flushed, because he couldn't deny it. "Shut up."

Iason smiled and pulled Riki back down against the sheets. "We'll discuss the rest in the morning. As I recall you told me to sleep."

There was no way Riki could sleep now, knowing that Cal was coming back. His mind was filled with how to make things work, like Iason said. "Can we really go tomorrow?"

"Yes. I've already arranged it with Katze."

Riki remembered Bean, who currently resided in the Furniture's room. "Where's he gonna sleep?" Did this mean they were finally getting rid of Bean?

"I'll arrange for the Pet Room to be redecorated while we are out. I'm sure that Cal will find it accommodating."

Riki sighed. "So we're keeping Bean?"

Iason had to hold back a chuckle. "Yes."

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"Master Mink?"

Jason turned to the woman with jewel green eyes and long flowing red hair as he stepped out of his car. Damn it. He'd just run to the office for a moment to tie up a few loose ends in his schedule so that he and Riki could take their time going to fetch Cal and had managed to return home quickly. Now he had to deal with this nonsense?

"Do I know you?"

"No, you don't, but if I could please have just a few minutes of your time?"

She had spent all day yesterday trying to get an appointment with the elusive Blondie, and had finally resorted to this sort of thing, waiting outside his condo until he turned up so she could speak with him. She'd lost nearly an entire day of sales waiting for him.

"I'm busy." Jason turned and started for the entrance of his condo.

"It's about Riki!"

He turned slowly, deliberately and removed his sunglasses. "What do you know of my pet?"

"I'm a friend...well, not a friend. I work in the square and Riki helped me out the other day."

Ah, this must be the woman who that guard had been ranting about. "Did he now?"

"Yes! Look, I didn't know he wasn't allowed to do such things without permission and I humbly apologize because it was really all my fault!"

"Your fault? Did you ask for his help?"

"No, well, yes and no. What I mean is he was considering buying something from me and we were haggling over the price." She smirked before she could help herself. "He's damn good at it actually."

"He was haggling over cigarettes?"

"Cigarettes? No. I sell jewelry and trinkets."

Iason blinked. Riki had wanted to make a purchase other than for those damn toxic sticks? Why would he be interested in jewelry? He only ever wore the ring and the bracelet Iason had given him and showed no further interest in such things. Iason was immediately annoyed that Riki had actually wanted something and he hadn't been there to buy it for him. Not only then, but he had obviously been kept from making a purchase by that idiot security guard.

"What was it he wished to purchase?"

Carrie lifted the bag in her hand and offered it to him. "This. Would you please give it to him? He really earned it. My sign is like brand new and I've had no problem with it since."

Iason accepted the bag and tried to stem his curiosity not to look inside immediately. "What was the issue with your sign?"

"Some hackers kept breaking into the software and putting inappropriate content on it. Riki fixed it and whatever he did, the hackers haven't been able to get back in. I didn't expect a pet to know so much about such things but he fixed it better than the techs I'd called in multiple times, and dealt with it so quickly too." She smiled. "You should be very proud of him."

"I see." So that was it, was it? Riki had bartered his impressive technical skills to trade for whatever was in this bag. "Thank you Miss..."

"Emeline. Carrie Emeline."

"Miss. Emeline. I will give this to Riki."

Iason slid his glasses back on then turned back towards his condo again.

He turned back to her, slightly annoyed. "Was there something else?"

"I...I know this is probably totally inappropriate, but I'll probably never get this chance to talk to you again, so I may as well go for broke."



Iason waited.

"I know Riki is your pet, but I was wondering...well, he really did do a fantastic job with my sign. I've gotten so many compliments on it already and a lot of people are asking for the name of my contact so they can have him look at their equipment." Carrie couldn't tell with Iason Mink glasses on what he thought of that, or if he might be getting angry with her, but she pressed forward. "I *know* Riki is a pet, but I think it's truly a waste to not also utilize his impressive skills. So, I am asking permission this time. Your permission to allow me to recommend him to other people and to allow him to work for them occasionally."

Iason stared at her for so long that Carrie was sure she had started to shrink, then finally he nodded. "I will consider it. Will that be all?"

"Just one more thing. I'm not from here, so I don't fully get this whole ownership thing, but it is obvious that Riki has pride in who he is and what he can do. I think keeping him as just a pet is crime against what he could be."

"A crime?" Iason removed his glasses again as his eyes narrowed on her. Did she not realize who he was and what the consequences of her words could mean? "Are you accusing me of something, Miss. Emeline?"

Carrie realized she preferred him with the glasses on. What cold, unforgiving eyes! "No. I just hate to see talent go to waste. Riki is yours, to do with what you will, and I am not disputing or judging you for that."

"Well, what a relief not to be judged."

Carrie heard the dripping sarcasm in Iason's voice but she was never one to back down from a fight, not when it was something important. "I only mean that you obvious don't need Riki with you all the time and you seem to be quite busy in your own right, so why not give him something to do as well? I've seen other pets flitter about the market place and Riki is not like them. He wasn't there to shop or preen; he was looking for something to do, a way to be useful. He strikes me as someone who needs to feel like he is accomplishing something."

"You seem to think you know an awful lot about my pet. Exactly how long have you been watching Riki?" Was there more to their relationship, Iason wondered as his anger started to rise. Who exactly was this woman?

"No, yesterday was the first time I had met him, but I can read people very well, Mr. Mink, I have to in order to be good at what I do. Riki was obviously bored by everything he saw and he also seemed..." She paused wondering if she was going too far.

"Don't stand on ceremony now, please finish what you were saying."

Fine. To hell with it, Carrie thought. Maybe she would be banned from the market place or something worse if she pissed this Blondie off, but she'd speak her mind damn it.

"He seemed lost, frankly, and lonely as hell. The other pets were clearly avoiding him, most of the vendors dismissed him or seemed uncomfortable whenever he came near their stalls and everyone else looked at him as if he was something they would rather scrape off their shoe and leave in the trash. It was appalling to watch him stand up to such scrutiny and pretend that it didn't affect him at all. And the minute he tried to help me, he was immediately scolded and forced to leave. The other pets seem to have more freedom than Riki does!"

"Riki is as free to do as the other pet's do," Iason stated, coldly, annoyed that this woman seemed to know so much about Riki and their situation after such a short time. He was also angry that things in Tanagura appeared not to have changed as much as he had hoped, in regards to Riki.

"Physically perhaps, but mentally it is obvious that he isn't free to do what he wants or go where he wants or say or act how he wants. The incident yesterday proved that, and I swear to God if you punished that sweet kid over it, I'll..."

Iason's eyebrow rose, suddenly intrigued. "You'll?" he prompted and was delighted to watch her face turn almost as red as her hair. So this woman had a temper did she? Was this what was sometimes referred as a mother

lion protecting her cub? Could this be something akin to a maternal instinct? Interesting.

"I'll be pissed, that's all!" she snapped. "And you won't like me when I'm angry!"

Iason almost laughed aloud. "I see. Was there anything else, Miss. Emeline?"

"N...no. That's all I wanted to say. Thank you for listening."

Iason nodded again then turned and disappeared into his building. Chuckling at the encounter, he took the portal to his floor then opened the door of his condo. Bean greeted him immediately to take his cloak.

"Would you like a drink, sir?"

"Yes. Where is Riki?"

"He is on the balcony."

"Good." Iason moved forward to find the mongrel, who was in his usual spot, perched on the barrier rail and smoking. "I'm back, Riki."

Riki glanced at him. "Hey, welcome back." He lifted his chin as Iason bent to kiss his lips. "That was quick."

"Yes." Iason lifted the bag in his hand. "A woman dropped this off for you."

Riki scowled, propped his cigarette between his lips and swung his legs back towards Iason. "What is it?"

"Something you purchased, I believe."

It couldn't be...was this? Riki pulled the small, fancy box out of the bag and stared at it. He didn't understand. He hadn't paid her the five hundred he had promised, so why would she bring it to him?

"Riki?" Iason asked, concerned by the flickering emotions on the mongrel's face. "Can't I see what you bought?"

Riki flushed as he remembered whom he had actually bought the broach for in the first place. Now that he had it in his hand, he was embarrassed at the idea of giving it to Iason. What would the Blondie think of such a thing? It was just a cheap piece of jewelry and certainly not something an Elite would consider valuable or appropriate to their status. Shit! What was he thinking? Maybe he should just give it back to Carrie? Yeah, that would probably be best, and besides he hadn't finished paying for it, as per their deal.

"The suspense is killing me," Iason said and plucked the box from Riki's unsteady hand.

"No, wait!" Shit! Shit! Why was his face so hot? Was he fucking blushing? This was unbelievable. "It's...It's just something...um...it's not really anything special. I don't even know why I got it."

"Now I am curious." Iason opened the lid and stared down at the sapphire broach. He touched the center gem, curious. It wasn't something he would have pictured Riki buying, but it was really quite lovely, and my how it shined. "It's very nice. Shall I pin it on you?"

"No!" Riki snatched the broach from the box and lowered his head, embarrassed.

"What is wrong, Riki? Is this not the one you wanted? Did she bring the wrong item?"

"No. It...it's the right one."

"Then why don't you try it on?"

"Because!" Riki slipped down from the barrier and stalked to the other side, keeping his back to Iason as he stared down at the broach. "I...It's not for me."

Iason felt a surge of anger and jealousy well up inside of him and tried to reel it in. "Oh?" he asked dangerously as he dropped firm hands onto Riki's shoulders. "Who is it for? Who are you buying gifts for, Riki?"

"You, okay!" Riki spun around and shoved the broach at Iason. "It's just a piece of junk! It doesn't mean anything! I just liked it because it matched your eyes!" Riki's eyes widened in horror as he realized he had said too much, and from the stunned expression on Iason's face his gesture had also shocked the Blondie. "Fuck!"

"Ri..." Iason began as Riki darted inside. Iason blinked several times as he tried to process what had just happened, and then he looked down at the broach in his hand. "For...me?" He slowly dropped into one of the terrace chairs and rubbed his finger over the intricate pattern of the jewel in his hand. Riki had bought him a gift? Riki had been thinking about him enough to consider the color of the gem when he made a choice? "Oh...my."

Iason put a hand to his chest as an overwhelming sense of joy surrounded him. He had been given many gifts over the years, but none of them compared to this. He smiled, slowly as he realized that Riki's curt behavior must have been due to embarrassment. How cute was that? "Ah, my love. How very charming you can be."

He rose, carefully pinned the broach to his tunic and then went in search of his adorable lover. He found Riki face down on their bed and smiled. "Are you tired?"

"No," Riki mumbled into the pillow.

"Good, because nor am I." He walked over and slapped Riki's butt, causing the mongrel to yelp. "Up. We're going out."

Riki rolled onto his side and rubbed his sore ass as Iason moved to their closet. "Where are we going?"

"To get Cal, of course."

"Really? We're really gonna go and bring him home?" Riki caught his leather jacket as Iason tossed it to him.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Have you contacted Katze or will we surprise him? It might be fun to surpr..." Riki paused in the act of sliding into his jacket as he spotted the broach on Iason's chest. He quickly turned the color Iason's inside tunic. "Why...why are you wearing it?"

"Am I not supposed to?"

"You...you don't have to. It's not valuable or..."

Iason caught Riki's shoulders and captured his mouth in a breath-stealing kiss. When he pulled back he could see the dark arousal in Riki's eyes, but he had already decided they would go out so there would be no time to explore it. "It is a gift from you, therefore it is priceless."

Riki lowered his eyes and felt his cheeks warm even more. "Stupid...saying such things."

"I love it, Riki," Iason said honestly, as he allowed Riki his moment of shyness as he pulled him into his arms and hugged him tightly, rather than forcing him to meet his gaze, as he wanted to do. "It was given to me by someone I love; therefore I will wear it every day."

Riki felt a surge of pleasure chorus through him as he hid his face in Iason's shoulder. He wasn't normally bashful about such things, but damn if he couldn't help feeling so now. "You...you don't have to wear it every day."

"Why not? You wear your bracelet and ring every day."

"You wear your ring too."

"And now I shall wear my beautiful broach, as well." He finally lifted Riki's chin so he could place a kiss on his lover's lips. "Thank you, Riki."

"You...you're welcome."

"Now, shall we go bring Cal home?"

"Yeah."

## Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki and Iason finally go to visit Cal

Cal finished adding the filling to the last of the fruit tarts and licked an extra drop of filling from his thumb. Baking always calmed him and he was glad that Katze allowed him to do the cooking while he was here. As a former Furniture, Katze was quite able and accustomed to taking care of himself, but he would allow Cal to do some of the minor of chores.

“Those look good,” Katze said as he reached around Cal from behind for one of the completed tarts, only to have his hand smacked away by the cook. “Hey!”

“They have to cool first.” Picking up the tray of tarts, Cal opened the refrigerator and slid them inside, then turned back to clean up the small mess he had made while baking.

“They taste just as good warm.”

Katze picked up the oil and granulated powder that Cal had used for the pastry, only to have the younger Furniture take them away from him and set them in the cupboard above the sink. Smirking he wet a cloth and started to wipe down the kitchen counter, then tried not to laugh when Cal politely pulled the cloth out of his hand and finished up.

“You baked so I should clean,” he reminded amused, knowing how difficult it was for Cal to allow others to do what he felt was his job. “That’s fair, right, since we’re both equal?”

They weren’t equal. Katze may still belong to Master Iason, but he was no longer Furniture. Katze was a businessman, respected by people on both sides of the scale, including Master Iason. Cal had been aware of Katze working for Master Iason, but had never really interacted with him, other than to solicit a call to Katze on behalf of his Master. While living with



Katze, he had learned much more about the possibilities of life outside of being a Furniture. The freedom that Katze enjoyed was incomprehensible to Cal.

Katze slept when he wanted to, ate when he wanted to and he didn't need to consider the needs of anyone else. He still answered to Master Iason, of course, but that was the only person he answered to, and Iason did not speak to Katze as Furniture, but more as a colleague. That was the biggest difference Cal had noticed, and it was also his largest source of confusion.

They weren't equal at all, he was still *just* Furniture and it concerned him that that fact was starting to bother him. He'd never had any aspirations of being more than what he was, what he was trained to be. He was happy being Furniture for Master Iason, and he had a very real fear that Master Iason would reject him when he saw how tall he was now, to the point that it kept him up at night. Yet, he often found himself feeling envious of Katze's position and couldn't understand why. Such conflicting feelings were alien to him and he simply couldn't get a proper handle on them.

Reluctantly, he held the cloth out for Katze, even though the counter was already sparkling clean again, because he *was* still just a Furniture. "I... apologize."

Katze sighed inwardly and accepted the cloth. "Why are you apologizing?"

Cal considered his words carefully, as he always did. "I have shown unforgiveable arrogance towards your kindness."

"I'm not your Master, Cal. You can be arrogant, willful, happy or sad and it doesn't offend me. I've told you repeatedly that you can just be yourself with me. We're the same, you and I, and..."

"We are not the same."

Katze blinked. "We both serve Iason Mink. We are both Furniture. How are we not the same?"

Cal declined to comment, as this was a discussion they'd had several times and he knew that he could not win it. Katze was under a false impression that they were alike, and nothing that Cal said would change that. He had no special skills as Katze did. He would not be recognized as something more because of those skills. He was only Furniture, which was why he was so afraid that if Master Iason had no more use for him...No, he mustn't think of such things.

Katze tossed the cloth in the sink and regarded Cal, quietly. "You know you can talk to me, right. You can say anything to me, and I won't judge you."

"There is nothing I would say that would require such judgement."

"Really? What about your height? Are you still worried about whether Iason will accept you back?"

"I will accept whatever Master Iason decides."

"That isn't what I asked you, Cal."

Cal was aware of that, but his response had been automatic. He did feel a little more comfortable with speaking his mind with Katze, but it was still difficult expressing himself.

Katze dropped his hand atop Cal's head, relieved when Cal did not immediately pull back. He had slowly been getting the young boy used to being touched. He didn't know what Iason had planned for Cal, but if the boy did end up staying with him, he wanted Cal to be able to adjust to life as more than just Furniture.

"Have you thought about what you will do if Iason decides not to take you back?"

Cal slowly shook his head and was alarmed at the nausea that crawled into his throat. What could he do? There was nothing else he could be, nowhere else he could go.

"You could stay here with me, if you wanted to?"

Cal glanced up at Katze, who was still several inches taller. Stay with Katze? He liked this man, admired him really, but what if his jealousy continued? Would that make things more difficult over all? “You don’t need me,” he replied, quietly. “You have no use for Furniture.”

“So, who says you have to be my Furniture? You could be my assistant and keep doing what you have been doing. Riki worked for me before too, you know? He didn’t seem to mind it much.”

“I am not Master Riki.”

“No.”

“I have no skills, but those of Furniture. I would be useless to you, as I am now.”

“You can learn new skills and you are not useless to me, Cal. You’ve been a big help around here.”

Cal wouldn’t, couldn’t believe that. Katze was simply being kind. His keen hearing picked up on the quite alert from Katze’s office indicating that someone had entered the building. “Someone has arrived. Are you expecting guests?” Katze didn’t have any appointments today that he was aware of, and no one ever just dropped in on the black market dealer, not unless those people wanted to lose their heads.

Katze stepped away from Cal and lit a cigarette. “Yeah.”

“Shall I prepare coffee?”

“Sure.”

“For how many?”

“Three.”

Katze regarded Cal for a hard moment, then stepped out of the kitchen and moved to the living area then started down the small set of stairs to the main entrance hall. He placed his palm to the wall by the door and the picture of

a seascape disappeared to show a set of six monitors that surveyed various parts of the building and its outside perimeter as well as a small side panel. He watched the two people step into the antiquated lift and pushed a button on the panel to allow the lift to rise.

“You’re early,” he muttered as he entered his code to disarm the traps he had set on his floor of the building to allow his visitors to make it to the apartment safely. “Guess it’s show time.”

Cal quickly programmed coffee and retrieved a bottle of wine, opening it to allow it to breathe, in case Katze’s visitors preferred a cool beverage to a hot one. Pulling off his small apron, he glanced down at the light-blue long sleeve shirt, dark jeans and burgundy vest he wore. After he had outgrown his uniform, Katze had purchased him some casual clothes, explaining that as he was not currently working as a Furniture, he may as well dress comfortably. The problem was that he felt more comfortable in his uniform, especially when they had guests.

Well, there was nothing to be done. He would not have the time to change before he would need to serve the coffee. The coffee machine beeped, indicating it was ready and he poured the steaming liquid into three cups, which he had set on a tray. He then added three small shakers of flavoring, picked up the tray and headed towards the living area.

He could hear the muffled voices coming from the downstairs vestibule as he set the tray on a table, and turned.

“Cal!”

The young Furniture was shocked to find himself in a bone-crushing hug when Riki rushed forward and threw his arms around him.

Riki pulled back, grinning and looked at the youth who was now almost the same height as him. “Holy shit! What has Katze been feeding you?”

Great Jupiter, don’t hug me! Cal lowered his head and darted a look towards his Master as Iason appeared with Katze, fully expecting a flash of

anger or jealousy. Why hadn't Katze told him they would be coming? Desperately he gathered up his courage and activated his training.

"Good afternoon, Master."

"Hello, Cal." Iason nodded, but his expression was unreadable. "You've grown."

"Yes. I apologize." This was it. This was where he would be told that he could no longer serve as their Furniture.

"Come in," Katze suggested, seeing Cal's apprehension only because he was also once a Furniture and he could tell the subtle deflections in the boy's face. "Cal's made coffee, but would you like something else to drink?"

"I would prefer a brandy," Iason said as he and Riki settled on the sofa.

"I'm good with this," Riki said as he reached for a cup and winked at the young boy. "Cal makes the best coffee."

Cal remained standing at attention, with his hands clasped behind his back, and resisted the urge to throw himself at Iason's feet and beg to return with them. Instead, he tried to focus on how best to accommodate them. Coffee really should be served with a snack, why had he forgotten that? The tarts weren't ready yet, what else did he have that he could offer them? He knew that Riki likes sweets. Were there any cookies left from the other day?

Once Katze had poured Iason his drink, and settled in his usual wing back chair with his own glass, Iason spoke again, negating Cal's chance to excuse himself and bring out more food.

"How have you found living with Katze, Cal?"

"He has been very kind."

"And what have you learned?"

Was he questioning his skills? Did Master Iason intend for him to stay with Katze? Was that why they were here, to end his hope? “Katze is a very capable individual, Sir, with many responsibilities.”

“And have you enjoyed your time here?”

Cal formulated the best way to answer this. Katze had been good to him, it was nice to speak with a person who was a former Furniture and had made a life for himself outside of that field. Katze seemed very sympathetic to his plight, but he felt rather useless here.

“I am grateful to Katze, but I feel I have been a burden to him.”

“That’s a load of crap,” Katze retorted. “He’s managed to completely reorganize my filing system and even discovered five new delivery and trade routes that are almost completely off the grid.”

“Indeed.” Iason watched Cal intently. “How did you manage that?”

“I...I like to read about the history of our world, as well as others, and compare how things change. Maps and atlases are a part of that type of study and I recalled some of the lesser known streets from previous decades, before much of the construction around the cities were implemented.”

As a Furniture, he had full access to the Main Libraries, and while he did enjoy historical documents and accounts, he found geography and topography the most interesting. He enjoyed studying old land and street maps of [Amoï](#) and comparing them to current ones; it was like watching a world, a city, a nation being born one line at a time.

“I was complaining one day because many of the current routes we use were being patrolled too often,” Katze stated as he sipped his drink. “So Cal asked why I didn’t use the old roads and I said there weren’t any that led to the places we needed to get to.” Katze set his drink down suddenly, rose and went to the small workstation by the wall. He keyed in some information and a hologram of the Tri-City area appeared before them. “Show them, Cal.”

“I...It was really nothing.”

“Show me,” Iason said knowing that Cal would not refuse the request from him.

Swallowing his sigh, Cal moved forward and using his finger on the hologram, he drew extra roads, streets and even a few streams and hills that overlapped or flowed beneath the regular routes.

Iason rose and studied the map. “Have all these routes been confirmed?”

Katze nodded. “Every one of them, and they are obviously rarely, if ever, used.”

“This is amazing, Cal!” Riki said, annoyed that Iason had not offered any praise yet. “How did you know all this was there?”

“I simply remember the overlays from old maps when I look at a new one.”

“A photographic memory?” Iason asked.

“I do not believe so. It seems to only work with maps and diagrams.”

“Still, that is impressive. Do you think you could also do something with building plans or sewage systems?”

“Yes. I have read some plans of that nature, what were available in the archives.”

“Which buildings have you seen plans on?”

“Almost all of the ones in Tanagura. A few in Midas.”

“Show me.” Iason nodded to Katze. “Bring up the Gem Tower to show the inside structure.”

A moment later, the spherical shape of the building that housed the offices of the Syndicate appeared in the hologram.

“Cal, can you show me any additions you can recall.”

Cal studied the map for a moment, then stepped forward and started adding hidden rooms, false walls, three additional staircases and surprisingly a sub-basement.

“I apologize, Sir, that is all I can recall at the moment.”

“That is more than enough,” Iason decided as he committed the new plans to memory. This could give him the leverage he needed to win over his brother’s and get things back on track. “Thank you, Cal. This will be a tremendous help.”

Cal flushed and then tried to pull himself back into a more stoic expression, but he caught the wink Riki shot him and felt his lips twitch in reply before he could help it.

Iason waved his hand and Katze switched off the hologram as they both returned to their seats. “That is a remarkable skill, Cal. I am pleased that you were of some assistance to Katze while you were here.”

While he was here? Did that mean he wouldn’t be here anymore? Would his Master take him back to Tanagura, or would he be sold to someone else or worse, terminated?

“I am delighted to have pleased you.”

“You seem to have fit in here well.”

“It appears so.” Oh no. Iason wasn’t taking him back! How did could this be? He really had grown too tall to be of service. What was he going to do? Despite all these desperate questions swimming around in his head, Cal’s expression remained neutral.

“Do you wish to stay here then, and continue assisting Katze?”

He liked Katze, but he didn’t want to stay with him. However, he could not say that. He had no right to ask for anything and saying such a thing would make him appear ungracious.



“Iason, stop teasing him.” Riki growled and turned to Cal. “You want to come home with us, right?”

A flicker of hope sparked inside Cal, but he didn’t allow himself to acknowledge it. Home? Yes, he supposed he did think of Master Mink’s condo as home. “I will do whatever my Master wishes.”

“Damn it! That’s not an answer!”

Cal glanced at Iason, and then back at Riki.

“That’s the only one he’s capable of giving, Riki,” Katze started quietly.

“That’s bullshit! Just tell the truth. Tell us what you want.”

“He can’t.”

Riki glared at Katze. “Why not?”

“Because I am Furniture,” Cal replied. “My needs are what my Master decides. I will do as I am bid. As Furniture, I have no other desire but to serve my Master.”

Iason, who had been quietly watching the exchange, finally spoke. “We have a new Furniture now,” he said, focusing on Cal. “A single household does not need two.”

“Then get rid of Bean!” Riki snapped. “You said we were coming to bring Cal home. You said you missed him! Stop fucking around!”

Cal almost stopped breathing. Master Iason had *missed* him? His stoic demeanor broke for a second and he glanced at Katze, who secretly smiled.

“Riki, I have no use for a Furniture who does not wish to serve me.”

“I do!” Cal flushed at his outburst and pulled his emotions back. “F... forgive me, Sir. I...What I mean to say is if it is your command I would of course wish to serve you.”

“The dilemma remains that we do not require two Furnitures.”

“What about what you said?” Riki demanded. “About becoming your ward?”

Cal gasped and his eyes widened in shock, unable to prevent his the surge of emotions from showing this time. “W...ward?”

Iason’s gaze hardened. “Even as my ward, he must have an occupation, Riki. Without one, he cannot return to Tanagura.”

Master Iason’s ward? Him? Cal suddenly felt light-headed and weak, his legs started to shake, and he was barely aware when Katze, after recovering from his own shock, rose and gently guided him to a chair. This wasn’t possible! He was not worthy of such a thing! He was just Furniture!

***You are nothing, but what your Master decides for you to be. You need nothing, but what your Master needs. You deserve nothing but to serve your Master.***

The hateful words from his programing sliced through his mind and heart, even as he fought to regain control. It was shameful to appear this way in front of his Master and Riki. He must bury these feelings and recover to a more normal state. What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he find his calm? Why were his hands shaking so badly? What was happening?

Riki, surprised to see the usual stoic boy in such a state started to rush towards Cal, but Iason put a hand on his arm and shook his head.

“Allow Katze to deal with it,” he said quietly, even as his former Furniture knelt before Cal, touched their heads together and murmured softly to him.

“You pushed him too far!” Riki hissed angrily. “All you ever do is fucking play with people and...”

“Enough.” Iason rose and hauled Riki to his feet, pulling him across the room and into the kitchen, leaving the two Furniture’s alone.

“Get off me!” Riki growled, trying to shake off Iason’s hold, which was of course impossible.

“You go too far!” Iason backed Riki up against the wall, pulled his wrists above his head and held him there.

“Me?” Riki glared at Iason incredulously. “You’re the one playing with his...”

“Do not blame me for your annoying ability to speak before thinking. It was you who caused Cal to react that way.”

“What? How?”

“You told him he would be my ward.”

“You said he already was! Did you lie about it?”

“No.”

“Then what the fuck difference...?”

“The difference,” Iason said as he gripped Riki’s chin painfully. “Is that Cal does not believe he is worthy of such a thing. Not only that, but you did not allow me to prepare him for such a change!”

“Prepare him? You were just sitting there, fucking with him! How is that better than telling him the truth?”

Iason released Riki and stepped back, disappointed. “You still do not understand about Furniture.”

“Stop calling him Furniture! He’s a kid! He’s Human for God’s sake!”

“I am aware of that, Riki...”

“Are you?” Riki rubbed his wrists, angrily. “Or are we all just fucking toys to Jupiter’s precious sons? Katze, Cal, *me!*”

Iason tightened his gloves, a sure sign of his declining calm. “Why can you not at least try to understand...”

“Understand what?” Riki lifted his chin, defiantly, angry at being manhandled for the first time in almost a year. “Understand that we’re all just piss-ant fodder for the Elite’s? How could *I* understand that? I’m just a fucking *pet*, after all!”

“What is wrong with you?” Iason snapped, his blue eyes narrowing coldly. “Why are you saying such things? Have I not proven that I am not like my brothers? Have I not destroyed numerous traditions and broken near all of our rules to keep you? Is ostracizing myself from my own not enough for you? What in the hell do you expect from me?”

Riki stared at Iason, stunned silent

“You *chose* to stay, yet you still complain about being a pet and have absolutely no concept of how very little like a pet you actually are, or of the special freedoms you enjoy. You bitch constantly about the rules, without any idea of how many I have already broken just to keep you with me and ensure your safety. You disrespect my kind at every available moment, including one who is my very close friend, and give no thought of how weak that makes me appear, because I appear to allow it and don’t beat you within an inch of your life for the offense!”

“I...no, I...”

“You have not tried to understand me or my kind at all! You do nothing but mock us and despise what we are!” Iason stepped back suddenly and stepped away, again straightening his gloves. In a calmer, softer voice he continued. “Do you not understand that when you do such things to them you are also doing them to me?”

Riki gaped at Iason’s back, hurt that the Blondie had physically turned away from him. That wasn’t true! The other Elites were different! “So what, you want me to bow to them and lick their boots when they’re talking shit about me and treating me like dirt? Would it be better if I got on my fucking knees and offered to blow them for...”

Riki's head reared back from the force of Iason's blow and had he not been so close to the wall, the slap probably would have sent him flying across the room. As it was, the slap was enough to knock him on his ass. He put a hand to his aching cheek as he glared at Iason.

Iason's hand curled into a fist preparing for further battle, but then Riki's furious eyes now sparkled with moisture and he slowly relaxed his fingers. He closed his eyes for a moment, reigned in his temper, then opened them again and crouched next to the fallen mongrel.

"I apologize," he said softly as carefully caressed the cheek he had hit. "I did not mean to do that."

The last time Iason had lost his shit was when he found out Guy had cut off the pet ring. He knew that Iason had wanted to kill Guy and he remembered how Iason had looked that day when he found him in the bunker. The fury and rage that had been in the Blondie's expression; and then the relief when he finally spotted Riki. Iason had still wanted him, despite him being castrated and effectively no longer of use as a pet. It had been the defining moment in their relationship, the moment that convinced Riki to admit to his feelings and to accept that Iason actually loved him. It had been the reason he chose to die with Iason.

"Riki?" Iason pressed his hand to Riki's red cheek. "I am sorry."

"I...I know." Riki knew that Iason would never intentionally hurt him, that knowledge had come at a great cost, but still he knew.

The fact that he could provoke Iason to go so far after all that had happened between them seemed to attest to the fact that the Blondie really was overworked and stressed. Iason had taken time out of his impossibly busy schedule to do bring Cal home, because Riki wanted him home, and here he was being a fucking asshole about it.

"I...I shouldn't have said that stuff." Riki sat up a little straighter, placed his hand over the one Iason still had pressed to his face. "I am trying. You know that right?" He sat forward so that his and Iason's face was almost touching. "I don't think of you as one of them, I don't think I ever have. It's

not like I wasn't treated badly before, when I was on my own, but I was able to defend myself and earn some respect. It's harder for me to deal with now because I can't speak up, because if I do it ends up causing trouble for you and I..."

"Riki," Iason sighed softly. "Don't."

"I know I have anger issues, I know I'm stupid sometimes and arrogant, but it's really fucking hard being less than nothing, y'know?"

"You are not nothing, Riki."

Riki dipped his head. "Don't doubt it, okay? I say shit sometimes, stupid shit. I can't help it, but I never mean it, not to you. I... You know we're... I mean I..."

Iason gently pressed his lips to Riki's, and alleviated the mongrel's awkwardness in trying to say what was so very hard for him to say. "I will never doubt you, Riki."

"Yeah." Riki raised his gaze. "Don't."

Iason caressed Riki's cheek again and the redness that was starting to spread across it. "Does it hurt?"

"Fuck yeah!"

"Shall I kiss it better?" Iason felt that tickle in his chest again as Riki's eyes shyly darted away again, even as the quietest consent whispered past his lips. Iason moved his hand, kissed Riki's cheek, once, twice, then his eyelids, then his nose, then his other cheek, and finally his mouth.

Riki allowed his eyes to flutter closed, as Iason's lips moved against his, and the Elite's tongue slid in to tease and torment him. It was over far too soon for Riki's liking, but he couldn't make himself pull Iason back into the kiss; his mongrel pride wouldn't allow it.

"So...now we're good again, right?"

“I think so.” Iason rose, then offered Riki a hand and pulled him up as well. “Now then, we still have a problem, Riki.”

“What?”

“Should Cal return to us, what would he do?”

Was Iason really expecting an answer from him? “How the fuck should I know?”

“Riki, I will gag you if you do not desist with the profanity.”

Despite their intimate moment seconds earlier, Riki glowered up at Iason, annoyed. He knew that Iason did not make idle threats and he did not want to be gagged in front of Katze and Cal. “Fine. But you didn’t answer my fu...my question!” he amended when Iason’s blue eyes turned to shards of ice.

“Do you not recall our earlier conversation?”

Riki scowled and suddenly remembered what Iason had said about him choosing a new role for Cal. “Oh. Yeah.”

Shit. Shit! Think, Riki, think! What the hell could Cal do? Iason kept insisting that the kid only knew how to be Furniture. He couldn’t make Cal his private Furniture, because pets weren’t allowed; were they? Elite, Furniture, Pet. What other fucking choices were there in Eos?

“I can find more for him to do here,” Katze interceded, as he entered the kitchen. “He really has been a big help, if that is acceptable to you, Iason.”

“It would solve the problem,” Iason replied, but did not take his gaze from Riki.

He couldn’t bring Cal back as a Furniture, because the law would demand that he be killed because of his age. While he had officially changed the boy’s registry and title, they still had to have an occupation for him or his brothers would protest. Just being his ward might not be enough, they had to cover all the angles. Creating a new use for Cal was the only way, and he

wanted to give Riki that responsibility simply because he trusted Riki to come up with a good plan. Also, it would allow Riki to feel like he had assisted with Cal's return, which Iason was beginning to suspect was something else his dear mongrel required.

"Is he okay?" Riki asked.

"Yeah, he'll be fine" Katze wanted to ask if Riki was okay, that mark on his cheek looked fresh, but he knew better than to interfere. "He's embarrassed that you saw him like that..."

"As he should be."

Riki glared at Iason while Katze simply smirked.

"But he's already back to normal," the black market dealer finished. "He's obviously confused and frankly, so am I. Are you really making him your ward, Iason?"

Iason nodded. "I have been unable to overturn the law, so I've found a way around it. However, I stand by my decision that we do not require two Furnitures, and no..." He fixed his gaze firmly on his defiant pet. "We are not getting rid of Bean."

"Asshole," Riki muttered, as he continued to rack his brain for a plan.

"Don't change the subject. We'll discuss you fetishes later."

Riki flushed, outraged. "M...My fet...You...you...!" Riki surged forward and slapped at Iason's chest in fury, only to have his hands immediately captured by the much larger Blondie.

Katze lifted his hands in surrender and quickly retreated, deciding that whatever had happened between them earlier, they had already made up for. "We'll be waiting in the parlor when you're ready."

"Not that I mind discussing such things," Iason replied, calmly as he pulled Riki closer and trapped him in his arms, while his hand wandered lower to



play with the younger man's backside. "For I thoroughly enjoy your asshole, Riki."

"Hey! Don't do that shit here!" Struggling against Iason was a waste of energy so he let himself go limp.

"What did I say about the profanity?" Iason bit Riki's neck and the younger man yelped.

"That hurt you motherfuc...Mmmhherh!"

Iason's mouth captured Riki's in a hard, thorough kiss that left the mongrel weak-kneed and breathless.

Riki closed his eyes and bit down on a gasp as Iason sucked on his earlobe as his wandering hand slid inside Riki's trousers to the hardening organ inside. "C...come on. Not here, please."

"Very well." Iason lowered his mouth to Riki's, thoroughly kissing him again before stepping back. "Not here, but you will have to make it up to me later."

Riki shivered at what Iason might have in mind for later as he ran his hands through his hair and tried to straighten his clothing, especially the jeans that were now cutting off his circulation. "Um...Iason, can't we just bring Cal home and think of what to do with him later?"

"No. The decision must be made now."

"Why?"

"If Cal does not have a proper position to return, he will elect to remain with Katze."

"Not if you order him to."

"I will not order him to."

“I...You just told me about this a few hours ago!” Riki turned away and braced his hands on the counter. “How am I supposed to figure this out with such short notice?”

Iason wrapped his arms around Riki from behind. “You have always been good at thinking on your feet, this is no different.”

“It is different!”

“Why?”

“This is about Cal, about his life. I can’t just...just come up with a quick fix for that.”

“Can’t you?”

“No!” Riki turned in his arms and looked up at Iason. “It’s too important! What if I make the wrong choice?”

“I don’t think you will.”

“But you don’t know! Why are you even telling me to do this? Why can’t you do it? Don’t you make all the decisions, anyway?”

“You said you wished for our relationship to feel more equal. This is one way to do that.”

“Yeah, but...” Riki leaned his cheek against Iason’s chest. “I just meant, letting me decide when we do it or what we eat sometimes. Shi...stuff like that. Nothing like this.”

“This is no different, Riki.” Iason caught his chin and lifted his gaze. “Whatever you decide it will change Cal’s life, but it can also change yours.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can’t give you the real freedom you desire, but I hope that this, if done properly, can ease that desire somewhat.”

Riki stared into those beautiful blue eyes above him and could feel himself easily lost in the colour and intensity. Iason was an android, he didn't have emotions in the same way as a Human did, but there was something there at work and Riki was always amazed when he saw whatever those feelings were, sometimes staring back at him.

"You think doing this, making this choice will make me feel free?"

"No, but I hope it will give you a purpose so that you will be less obsessed with that other freedom."

"You think I'm obsessed?" Riki asked, suddenly hurt. Hadn't he chosen to stay with Iason? Why would he say such a thing?

Iason slid his fingers through Riki's hair. "Are you not? Do you not still desire to be away from Eos and the Elite culture? To be allowed to go where you wish when you wish? To not be a pet?"

"Yes," Riki replied without hesitation. "But that doesn't include you. I don't want freedom from you, Iason. If I still wanted that I wouldn't be here."

Iason closed his eyes, surprised at the relief and joy that filled him at Riki's simple confession. He dipped his forehead and touched it to Riki's. "Thank you for that."

Riki could feel the heat sting his cheeks, even as he forced his arms to curl around Iason's back. "You're welcome."

"Yet, you do still have feelings of inadequacy, do you not?"

Riki was startled by the question, more so because it hit so close to the truth. "Not...not really," he murmured against Iason's chest when the Blondie hugged him closer. "I get bored and stuff because there is nothing to do, and everything is done for me, but that's because I spent so many years making my own way. I...I wouldn't say...I mean, it's not anything like I resent you still."

"Still?"

Riki lifted his head to meet Iason's gaze. "I used to hate you remember? I mean, what you did to me was fucked up...shit. Sorry." He slapped his hand against his neck expecting to be bit again, but instead he felt the vibration of Iason's chuckle and, relieved Iason wasn't going to hold the swearing against him, continued. "I hated you and I resented what you did to me."

"Ah, yes." Iason slid a gloved finger down Riki's cheek. "And now?"

"Now? Well, now I don't really feel that way anymore. I still get mad sometimes because of the situation and the fact that you basically took away my choice, but...but then you have me back my choice and I...you know."

"You chose to stay."

Riki nodded and hid his flaming face in Iason's chest again, furious that he couldn't contain his embarrassment. Why were they even talking about this? How had their conversation gotten so...so intimate?

Iason squeezed Riki a little harder, he really did love this tactless, hard headed, obstinate and sometimes ridiculously shy Human.

"About Cal," Riki murmured, trying to turn the conversation away from him. "He can't be my personal Furniture right?"

"No."

"And there's no way I'd make him a pet, even if that was possible, so what does that leave?"

Iason shrugged. "That is something you have to discover, my love." He softly kissed Riki. "And I believe you will. You have grown so much since the first time we met. You have matured into a fine, capable young man."

"Yeah, that you keep as a *pet*."

Iason flicked Riki's ear, watched his lover flinch, offended. "I think I shall rescind my offer to wait until we get home..."

"No!" Riki pushed against Iason's chest, because he had no doubt that the Blondie would indeed strip and fuck him right here in Katze's kitchen. He looked up at Iason with his best puppy dog eyes. "I'm sorry."

"That expression doesn't work on me."

"Sure it does." Riki fluttered his eyelashes and pursed his lips into a pout. "Doesn't it?"

Iason chuckled again. Damn him. "You are such a troublesome creature."

"Seriously, Iason, I don't have any clue for Cal's new job. I mean, I may have street smarts and know computers, but I only have the minimum curriculum from Guardian and...and..."

"And?" Iason prompted as he watched Riki scowl. "What is it, love?"

"I'm an idiot."

"You most certainly are not!"

"No, I mean...I mean I don't have much smarts....book learning I mean."

Iason stepped back so he could look at Riki properly. "What do you mean?"

"Cal...Cal could be...my...um...my tutor." Shit! Fuck! What was he in fucking grade school? "Other pets get tutors, right, for shi...I mean stuff like music and art?"

"True." Iason tilted his head, intrigued. "Do you wish to learn about art and music, Riki?"

"Hell no!" Riki closed his mouth with a snap.

He didn't care about any of that artsy stuff, he privately scorned the other pets who would sing or dance just to please their master's, but it was all he could think of for Cal. It hurt his pride to admit it, but there was still a lot of stuff he didn't know. He didn't have any culture or book learning. Who needed that shit? It was just one more thing that separated him from the other pets, but still...if he had to bury his pride a little to find a place for Cal, then...so be it.

"I mean...not that stuff, but he could teach me other things. Like he said, about history and other worlds and..." An idea came to him suddenly and his expression softened with just a hint of grief as he met Iason's curious gaze again. "Maybe...maybe he could help me find where I came from?"

Iason laid his hand against Riki's cheek. "Do you truly wish to know?"

"Y...yeah. I think, I kind of need to. I mean, I know I'm a mongrel, that won't change, but I've never really felt like one, you know? Maybe I need to find out why?"

"It will be difficult and even if you learn the answer, there is no guarantee that your father is still alive, Riki."

"No. I know, but I'd like to try." Riki lifted his gaze to Iason's and covered the hand on his cheek with his own palm. "Will you let me?"

Iason wanted to deny the request, wanted to lock Riki in his bedroom and have Jupiter replace the block she had broken through. What if Riki did indeed locate the planet where he was born? What if Riki's father was alive? Perhaps Riki had an entire family who wanted him. Would they fight to get him back? Would they steal him away? Iason couldn't, wouldn't give Riki up, not even to a long lost father, and yet...how could he deny allowing Riki to learn his origin?

Iason's hesitation worried Riki. "Iason?" he asked again and felt his heartbeat increase exponentially. What if Iason said no? The Blondie could be ridiculously possessive and if he did say no, would Riki even be willing to go against him?

“Riki.” Watching the sudden uncertainty in his lover’s eyes, Iason swallowed his own misgivings and kissed Riki’s cheek. He would give Riki all that he was capable of giving, anything he asked if it was possible. “I think it is a very good idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

Riki smiled, shyly. “So, we can bring Cal home now?”

“Well, let’s tell him what he will be doing first and then if he accepts the position then yes we can bring him home.”

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“Welcome home, Sirs,” Bean greeted as Iason and Riki entered the condo and Bean immediately took Iason’s cloak. Cal stepped in behind them, clutching a small case and Bean noticed the small case clutched in the tall boy’s hands. “Shall I prepare the third floor guest room, Sir?”

Rather than reply, Iason looked down at Iason. “Well, what do you think?”

“Cal’s not a guest.” Riki said and caught Cal’s arm to pull the suddenly reluctant boy into the step down living room. “I’ll show you to your room, Cal.”

“Are the renovations for the pet room finished?” Iason asked Bean as he watched as the pair headed across the room towards the lift.

“Yes, Sir. They just finished up a few moments before you arrived.”

“Good.”

“Lunch will be ready in about twenty minutes, Sir. Is there anything you would like me to prepare for your guest during his stay? Perhaps a tour of the apartment and basic amenities?”

Iason knew Bean was thinking that Cal was another pet, which was an obvious assumption since the pet room had been refurbished, but he quickly disbursed the idea. “No. Cal used to be our Furniture, he already knows his way around so we just leave him to make himself at home.”

For the first time, Iason saw the smallest flash of annoyance in Bean’s dark eyes. “Am I to assume my services are no longer required, Sir?”

“Not at all.”

“I apologize for my continued confusion, Sir. Are my services somehow lacking?”

“No, you’ve been doing a fine job of running the house. Cal was our Furniture. He is now Riki’s personal tutor.”

“I see. Very well, thank you for clarifying that, Sir. I shall finish preparing the meal.”

“Fine.” Iason moved across the living area and stepped up into his office, to check his messages.

Riki opened the door to the pet room, felt a small clench of fear and anger that always appeared when he came near this room, and pushed it back. He’d hardly been in here the last two years, but those memories remained, regardless of the passage of time.

As the door slid open, the oppressive feelings of the past melted away. The hated pet chair where he had been chained and tormented for months had been replaced with a large rounded bed accented with pretty, comfortable looking sheets. Instead of transparent wall cupboards that held sexual toys for both pleasure and punishment, there was a tasteful matching bureau and wardrobe closet.



The sensual red and black colors that had outfitted the room previously were now shaded in a lovely pastel blue with a deep crimson boarder. A massive area rug in reds, golds and blues took over a good deal of the floor, beneath the bed, and several accent shelves were nestled in the corners of the room for books or knickknacks.

“Wow!” Riki said and stepped inside, pleased when he didn’t feel even a glimmer of anger. “They did a great job.”

“I...I don’t understand,” Cal said, still standing outside the door. “What is this room for?”

“It’s yours.” Riki turned, walked over behind Cal and gently pushed him over the threshold. “It doesn’t look anything like what it did before, which is good.” He walked to the small desk and computer console by the wall. “Hey, this is a pretty spark system.” He ran his hand fondly over the monitor. “Nothing but the best for Iason.”

Cal gripped his case tighter as his eyes surveyed the luxurious room, well luxurious compared to the room he’d slept in as Furniture anyway. Was this really for him? He didn’t need all of this...this room and comfort. What was Master Iason thinking? What would their new Furniture think, putting someone like him in a room like this?

“Hey, Cal!” Riki poked his head out of the ensuite bathroom. “They even changed it up in here. Come see!” When Cal remained in the center of the room, silent and trembling, Riki walked back to him. “Hey, what’s wrong? Don’t you like it?”

“It...thank you, truly, but this...this is too much!”

Riki caught Cal’s shoulders. “It’s not. You’re not Furniture anymore.”

“No, but...”

“You’re Iason’s ward and my teacher. You can’t sleep in that back room of a kitchen when you hold such a responsibility, right? I mean, that would be, like, an embarrassment to Iason or some shit, right?”

“No, I mean, yes, of course, but Riki...”

“I need you, Cal. I need you to teach me and help me find my people and where I come from. I know this is hard, it will be hard for me to get used to, too, so we’ll just have to lean on each other and get through it, right?”

Cal stared into Riki’s obsidian eyes and felt his heart calm. “I don’t know how much help I will be, but I will certainly try to find your family, Riki.”

“You and Iason are my family now. I’m just looking for answers of who I am and where I came from, so I’m counting on you. Okay?”

Cal clutched a hand to his chest and lowered his eyes so Riki would not see the tears rising inside of them. Riki was so stubbornly independent, the idea that he would ask for help or willingly admit to relying on someone else was staggering. Did he really consider them family? Cal couldn’t remember ever having a family, except in those small snippets of torturous brainwashing, and those faded almost immediately afterwards.

“O...okay.”

Riki squeezed Cal’s shoulder and moved back to the door. “I’ll leave you to unpack, see you at lunch.”

“Yes...See you.”

Cal watched Riki step out and close the door, then once again turned to inspect the bedroom...his bedroom. Could he really do this? Were they just keeping him around out of pity? Well, so what if it was pity, although he did not really believe Master Iason capable of such an emotion, but Riki could have possibly convinced him. Despite his rebellious nature and hard outside appearance, Cal knew that Riki was probably the kindest, most sincere and sympathetic of all of them, he envied that sometimes.

“Such a sweet boy,” Cal sighed as he walked to the bed and set his case upon it.

Even though Riki was much older than he, Cal still considered the young man from Ceres to be his charge. He had bathed Riki and helped him dress, had walked him around Eos on a chain, which had made them both feel uncomfortable, but Master Iason had insisted it be done. When he had thought his Master and Riki dead, well, it had nearly crushed him. He'd become so attached to the mongrel, and he knew that was against the rules, but Riki was different. He was different from any other pet, any other person that Cal had ever known.

“Well, Riki and Master Iason *are* counting on me,” he said to himself as he opened his case and pulled out some of the clothes that Katze had helped him pack. “I must do my best to be of assistance and not disappoint them. I shall be an impeccable and informative tutor.” He nodded to himself as he set his shirts in one of the dresser drawers and returned to the case for more. He gathered some slacks and set them in a lower drawer. “I will find where you come from, Riki. It is the least that I can do for all you have done for me, and for Master Iason.”

He knew his Master was happier with Riki than he had been before, although he had known that Riki had been a pet for Iason previously, and then had been released for a time. During that time he had come to work for Master Iason and the Blondie had seemed...well depressed most of the time, if it was even possible for an Elite to feel such a thing. But once Riki had returned, Master Iason changed into a much more friendly and relaxed person.

A knock on his door caused Cal to turn to the young boy with dark eyes and hair standing in the doorway.

“May I assist with your unpacking?” Bean asked, politely.

Cal shook his head, embarrassed by the offer, after all they were both equal. “No, I can do it. Thank you.”

“Is there anything you need that has not been supplied? Do you approve of the design, or shall we change it to a different color?”

“Oh no. It’s fine, really.” Cal felt he should probably clear the air between them before they went any further. “Your name is Bean, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Cal.”

“I have been made aware.”

Cal detected the slightest hint of distaste in the younger man’s voice. “How old are you, may I ask?”

“I just turned ten, Sir.”

“You’re only a couple of years younger than me, so you don’t need to call me sir, Cal will do, and I don’t expect your duties to extend to me.”

“You are a guest in Master Iason’s home and a teacher to The Pet. I will of course tend to all your needs as well as theirs, as is my duty.”

The pet? Definitely a trace of scorn there. Did Bean not like Riki? Is this why Riki had suggested getting rid of Bean back at Katze’s? Was the dislike mutual? Of course, he could recall that Riki wasn’t overly fond of him at first either and he almost smiled.

“I know that Riki can be difficult, but really, once you get to know him he can be quite nice.”

“I need only tend to The Pet’s basic needs and report any misdeeds to Master Iason,” Bean returned blandly. “Forming attachments is strictly forbidden. All Furniture know this.”

The subtle baiting was obvious, but Cal refused to bite. He’d been insulted before, such things had never bothered him. One had to have a thick skin as Furniture, besides he needed to try and get along with Bean so as not to upset his position here. He did not want to throw away the second chance he had been given.

“You’re right of course, please forgive me.” Cal offered a slight bow to Bean. “We are all in your care, please do your best.”

Bean blinked, as if taken aback by Cal’s response, then nodded curtly. “Lunch will be served in five minutes.”

“Thank you, Bean.”

Cal released a breath as the boy left, then turned back and finished his unpacking. Once done he headed back to the main floor. Habit had him heading through the dining area and towards the kitchen to start serving the food, but Riki speaking to Bean caused him to stumble to a halt.

“We need another setting.”

Bean stiffened ever so slightly as he poured Iason’s wine, then returned to normal. “I apologize. I shall bring one right away.”

“Here,” Riki said as he spotted Cal, and hopped up to pull out the chair opposite his. “Sit.”

Cal immediately looked towards his master for permission, and Iason gave a subtle nod.

Once Cal was seated and Riki had resumed his seat, Iason leaned in and quietly spoke in Riki’s ear. “Don’t do that again.”

“What?” Riki asked, startled.

“Hold the chair for Cal, you embarrassed him. He is not used to such things remember? We must help him adjust slowly.”

“I was just...” Riki peered through his fringe of bangs, saw the pink spots on Cal’s cheeks and swore softly. “Shit. I forgot.”

Iason squeezed Riki’s knee under the table, affectionately. He could tell that his lover was excited to have Cal back, and he was pleased to have the boy with them again as well, but Riki still did not grasp the enormity of how such a change would affect their former Furniture.

Bean returned with a place setting for Cal. "Shall I serve now, Sir?"

"Yes," Iason said as Cal started to rise.

"I can help..."

"No." Both Bean and Riki spoke simultaneously.

Cal blinked and slowly sat down again. "I'm sorry."

Realizing that he had screwed up and embarrassed Cal again, Riki cleared his throat and tried to think of a way to make it better.

"Bean is more than capable of serving the meals," Iason reminded with a hint of kindness in his voice. "That is his job, yours is to teach and I am sure you will do well at it."

"Y...yes. Thank you, Sir. I will try."

Riki could see that Cal was uncomfortable and cursed himself for not being able to remedy it, but then an idea came to it. "Can you teach me to cook too?"

Both Cal and Iason stared at him, the younger one visibly startled. "To cook?"

"Yeah." Riki waited as Bean returned with three dishes of sweet smelling meat and vegetables and placed the servings before them. "I miss the things you cook, they tasted really good. It's still teaching, and I used to like to cook when I was in Ceres. I never had a lot to work with, so there is definitely room for improvement, right?"

Again, Cal turned to Iason for permission and ignoring the boy's habit, Iason refused to meet his gaze and concentrated on filling his mouth with wine. Cal needed to look to Riki if he required permission now, or make the decision himself.

"I can teach you to cook," Cal said softly, as Bean poured a glass of juice for Riki, then turned to him.

“What would you like to drink, Sir?”

Cal tried not to wince. “Just water is fine, thank you.”

“Very good, Sir.”

Riki glared at Bean’s departing back then turned his attention to Cal again.  
“So...chocolate cake for supper?”

“Are you asking him to make it for you, or will that be your first lesson?”  
Iason asked, amused.

“Um...I’ll try making it, but...have another on hand, just in case.”

Iason laughed and he noticed a slight twitch in Cal’s lips as well.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So...I am thinking of doing a separate story, probably just a few chapters, based solely on Katze and how he became Iason's furniture. What do you think? Would anyone be interested in reading it? Please let me know and don't forget to review the chapter you just read!! :-)  
Shameless begging is something I learned from my Master.

## Chapter 11

### Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is injured and Riki finds something to do

“Look out!”

Guy glanced up from the bike he was working on just in time to see the chain moving an engine to the worktable snap and plummet towards the youngest member of his new crew. He had lunged for the boy before his brain finished telling him to move, and lifted his mechanical arm over them both just as the engine hit.

There was a horrifying crunch of metal as Guy shoved the crewman out of the way and deflected the bulk of the heavy piece of equipment with his artificial arm, but a corner of the engine caught him across the shoulder and drove him to his knees. Pain sliced through his real flesh and he hissed, even as the other crew members rushed towards him.

“Guy!” Selene cried crouching beside him, quickly shedding her dirty overall jacket and pulling off her white T-shirt to press it to his gushing wound. “Call for a medic. Now!”

The shop supervisor ran for a com-terminal as Guy glanced up at the pretty girl who had a gift for engine repair. He managed to grin through the pain. “I’m okay. Just a scratch.”

“Don’t be a tough guy. You could’ve been killed, you idiot!”

“I...I’m so sorry.” Tanner whimpered, curled up by Guy’s feet, still shaking from the fright of almost being crushed by an engine. “I...I just froze.”

“Not your fault,” Guy assured and struggled to stay conscious. He glanced down at his mechanical arm, which had been ripped open to expose several of the mechanical parts inside. Ashamed, he tried to cover the damage with



his real, only to have the woman beside him cover it with her discarded jacket, just as the others reached them.

“If we’d known it took something like this to get your clothes off, we would have tried it sooner,” a short, stocky built mechanic named Kyle joked, as he deliberately oogled the firm, luscious breasts in a pretty, pink sports bra on display.

“Yeah,” Anren agreed as he knelt behind Guy and gently pulled the taller man onto his lap. “Who knew you were hiding *those* under that coverall?”

“A girl’s gotta have some secrets,” she retorted as continued to press against Guy’s wound, concerned that the bleeding wasn’t stopping. “Besides, you assholes don’t need any other distractions from getting your work done.”

Guy appreciated everyone trying to keep the situation light. He was still getting used to the idea that these people actually listened to him, and did as he asked. They didn’t care that he was a Mongrel from Ceres, that meant nothing to them, but it was still a vast change from being a follower to being a leader. He’d stumbled at first, not at all confident in his ability, or even his right to decide their positions or ask them to do a specific task. As Riki’s right-hand man it had been easier, because the orders had come from Riki, and he had but to see them done. Now the orders came from him, he made all the decisions and it was challenging. Especially since he’d had no friends other than the guys in Bisson.

Celene had been the most difficult, he was still getting used to having a woman around, they had been so scarce in Ceres. He’d been uncomfortable around her at first, but as Shiao had told him he could pick his own crew, he hadn’t been able to ignore her impressive skills when she applied for the job. Luckily, Selene was open, funny and confident in herself and her abilities. She also encouraged and excelled at flirting, which was another thing he’d had to get used to while working with her.

She had pretty breasts, he decided, as his head started to swim and the color of her bra began to fade. When she said thank you, Guy realized he’d voiced his thought aloud, but didn’t even have the energy to blush. He saw

her lean towards him, frowning as she said his name, and then darkness claimed him.

When Guy awoke, he was on a padded table, in a pale blue room with a small shaded window. Turning his head to the side, he spotted a tall, familiar brunette standing by the window. As if sensing he was being watched, Shiao turned and walked over to the med-bed.

“Hello trouble.”

Guy blinked and wet his lips, trying to remember what happened and how he had ended up here, but his mind was fuzzy. “Hey.” He tried to sit up, but Shiao immediately pressed a hand to his chest and kept him in place.

“Down boy. Do you remember what happened?”

Guy stared at his employer and friend as bits and pieces came back to him. “An engine,” he recalled, quietly. “Was falling. There was a crash...and blood...” His face flushed as another image invaded his mind. “And breasts.”

Shiao’s right eyebrow almost disappeared into his hairline. “Sounds like quite the adventure.”

Suddenly remembering the damage to his mechanical arm, he looked to the left and saw the artificial arm looked as good as new. “You fixed it.”

“Not I personally, but yes the damage has been repaired. Your shoulder was not so easily dealt with.”

Guy lifted his real hand and could feel the bandages around his shoulder and torso. “How bad?”

“The engine ripped through the bone, muscle and tissue, serrated several arteries.”

Guy swallowed, nervously. He wasn’t in any pain, but they may have given him medication; that would explain the fuzziness in his head. “So...pretty bad.”

“Yes. I am afraid you shall never play the vinolen again.”

Guy blinked, confused by the mention of an old string instrument. “I...I couldn’t play one before.”

“Ah.” Shiao nodded. “In that case you shall be fine.”

“Nice.” Guy grinned. Most people thought Androids didn’t have a sense of humor, but that was probably because of their deadpan delivery. He considered Shiao to be enormously funny, even if others didn’t. “Can we go home now?”

“Yes, once you’ve finished your drink.” Shiao pointed to the cylinder of liquid that was trickling from a perched machine, down through a thin tube and into an IV in Guy’s arm.

“What is it?”

“Just fluids. You lost a good deal of blood. A transfusion was required after they knitted your shoulder, but you were sweating a lot and became dehydrated.”

“Oh.”

“Your shoulder will heal in time, you may require some therapy and the physician has prescribed some medication for pain and to stave off infection.” Shiao inspected the near empty vial dangling above Guy’s bed, curiously. “No work for at least a week.”

Shit! “Sorry.”

Shiao tilted his head. “Why are you apologizing?”

“For causing you trouble.” If he wasn’t there to finish the work on the new cycles the plant would lose money.

“Ah, well. My life is far more interesting since you came along, certainly. Although, I could hardly be angry over the fact that you sacrificed your arm

to save a member of your crew. That is a very commendable..." Shiao smirked at him. "A very Human thing to do."

"I didn't even think..." Guy admitted as he glanced towards the window, then back at Shiao. "Is everyone else okay?"

"They were all very shaken up, including the boy you saved. They only just left."

"What do you mean?"

"They insisted on staying here until they were sure you would be okay."

Guy felt something heavy pressing on his chest as his eyes widened in surprise. "*All* of them?"

"Oh yes. They seem very fond of you, Guy." Guy set his large hand on Guy's head, ruffled his hair. "It seems you have a new gang now."

Guy turned his head away, beyond touched that they...that anyone would be worried about him. Not since Riki...He closed his eyes and grimaced. Damn it! Why did he have to compare everything to Riki? He had told Shiao everything over the last week or so, ever since his nightmare. He was more comfortable talking about his past and Shiao encouraged it. The Onyx had been right, talking about it did help ease some of his guilt, although he still occasionally had nightmares.

"Are you feeling unwell again? Shall I call for the nurse?"

"No." Guy looked back at Shiao. "I just want to go home."

Shiao smiled and leaned down to tap Guy's nose. "That is most enjoyable to hear."

"That I want to go home?"

"That you consider our place your home. It is of some relief to me, Guy. I worried you might never feel truly comfortable there. That you missed your mongrel city and might wish to return one day."

Guy sat up slowly and this time Shiao did not attempt to stop him. “I never really thought of Ceres as home,” he admitted, quietly. “It was just the place where I grew up.” And Riki, the place where Riki was, had always felt like home to him. “I do like it here and I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for me, but...”

Shiao put a finger to Guy’s lips. “You aren’t going to start spouting that nonsense about owing me again, are you?”

Guy swallowed his words and shook his head, enjoying the light pressure against his mouth, and for a brief, very brief moment, he felt the urge to flick his tongue out. Ashamed of the thought he dipped his head, effectively pulling away from the Onxy’s touch. Where in the hell had *that* come from?

He knew that Shiao didn’t want his gratitude and considered their relationship beyond the feelings of gratitude, or payment of debt. He had never known anyone as honest or generous as Shiao, it was hard sometimes to remember he was an Elite, and the same as Iason Mink.

“I know you don’t understand my feelings in that regard,” he admitted, then paused as a nurse entered, checked his IV and nodded.

“Good. All done.” She disconnected the IV, slid a sterile wipe across the area and placed a small circular patch over the area, that was almost the same color as Guy’s skin.

“Is he free to leave?” Shiao asked.

“Yes, but he isn’t to have any physical exertions for the next five days at least. After that he will need to see the Leading Physician again to see how it has healed and if therapy is needed.”

“Thank you.”

Shiao helped Guy dress and put his shoes on. His T-Shirt had been cut off, so Shiao pulled off his dark blue draping jacket, leaving him in a gold and blue shirt and vest, and slid Guy’s arms through it. The jacket hung almost to Guy’s knees and his hands had disappeared beneath the cuffs.

“How fucking tall are you, anyway?” Guy demanded, used to be the tallest in the pack and nowhere close to short, stared at the sleeves of the jacket in astonishment. Shiao towered over him by at least three or four inches, but they were close to the same width, so he never really considered how much of a difference there was between them.

“Two point zero five seven four meters.”

“How much is that in feet?”

Shiao diligently rolled up the sleeves of the jacket. “Six feet, nine inches.”

“Fuck me.” Guy was six-foot-four and considered a giant by most.

“I think not. However, there are establishments around that can find you a comparable mate if you are so inclined.” Shiao pulled the lapels of the jacket together and ran his hand down a gold seam in the front, instantly sealing the garment closed. “I would recommend waiting until you are fully healed, so as to fully enjoy the experience.”

Guy stared at him, trying to ascertain if Shiao was kidding again; it was sometimes hard to tell. “I didn’t mean I want you to actually fuck me. Its... it can be used as an expression of...of disbelief or wonder.”

“Odd.” Shiao scowled, tugged at the jacket hem to straighten it, as if he was dressing a mannequin, until Guy smacked his hands away.

“Shit, don’t make it longer!”

Shiao stepped back and put a hand to his chin, studying the sight of Guy standing in his over-sized jacket. “I rather like it.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“On the contrary, my database contains a wide range of...”

Guy finally laughed. It was impossible to keep up with the Onyx. One minute he was talking like an android, the next he seemed more Human than most people. “Can we go home now?”

Shiao smiled. “Yes.” He guided Guy out to his car and settled him in the passenger side. “Are you in pain?” He asked when Guy hissed a little as he sat.

“Not really, just kind of sore.”

The Onyx nodded. “Good,” he rounded and climbed in on the driver’s side and moments later, they were headed home. “While I do not relish you getting injured, I think this happened at an opportune moment.”

Guy glanced at him. “Oh?”

“Yes. The sales of the new aircycle you designed are going very well and I had intended to visit some of the distributors, to check the numbers myself. You could come with me.”

“Why?”

“For one, it would get you out of the house so you don’t get bored, and for another I think it would be good to allow the distributors to meet the designer of their best selling product.” Shiao glanced at him. “Don’t you?”

Guy dipped his head, he didn’t consider himself a designer, he just had a way with bikes, that was all. Shiao was responsible for all the parts and most of the assembly. “Would it help the sales if they meet me?”

“Well, that is uncertain, but I think they might try to sell even harder after they meet you. It is good customer relations, and besides, we can visit some other cycle shops on the tour and perhaps you can come up with some new ideas. You would still technically be working.”

Guy nodded, he liked that idea, rather than sitting around waiting to mend. “The nurse said I had to come back to have my shoulder looked at.”

“Our trip won’t take more than a week, and if there is an issue I am sure they have medical facilities there.” Shiao glanced over at Guy. “Unless you’re nervous about the space travel?”

“No!” Guy knew he answered way to fast and he caught Shiao’s smirk. “Oh shut up. I’m not afraid! It just...does weird things to my stomach.”

“I have something to help you with that. So, will you accompany me?”

An entire week with just him and Shiao, visiting other bike shops, maybe tasting some of the different cuisines. It actually sounded like heaven. “Yeah. Sure. I’m in.”

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“So, did your friend like the broach?” Carrie asked as she leaned over Riki’s shoulder. He was seated inside her booth behind the main display counter fiddling with her display again. She was delighted to watch the dark skin at the base of the young man’s neck turn a light pink.

“Yeah.” Riki pulled the tiny panel off the side of the machine and picked up his multi-tool. He was both touched and embarrassed that Iason chose to wear the sapphire broach every day, in fact he never left work without it.

Carrie grinned and turned away as a customer approached. The woman purchased a necklace, two hairpins and a ring for the quoted price. Carrie quickly scanned the credit chip for the required amount, wrapped and bagged the items and watched the woman walk away. She sighed and turned back to watch Riki work.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, without looking up from his work. “You got the price you wanted and sold a lot.”

“Sure, and that’s always nice,” she agreed as she reached under the counter and inside her small cooler for two drinks. “But it’s sooooo boring when they don’t at least argue a little bit.” She handed him one of the drinks. “I can’t keep my bartering skills in shape with *that* kind of attitude.”

Riki grinned, set the display box down and accepted the drink. “Speaking of bartering, how much you paying me for this?”



“Ten credits.”

Riki wiggled his finger.

“Okay, fifteen then.” She deliberately started her bid low to get the most enjoyment out of their game.

Riki looked down at her display box, which was in pieces. “That’d barely cover the dis-assembly.” He shrugged and took a drink. “I guess you can figure out how to put it back together...eventually.”

Carrie was not mechanically inclined and he knew it, still she was tickled at the challenge. “It wouldn’t say much for your reputation, leaving a job unfinished.”

“My reputation is shit anyway.” Another long swig. “Two hundred credits.”

Carrie pretended to look outraged. “Have you lost your mind? I could buy a new display for that!” She paused, considered and sipped her drink. “Thirty credits. That more than double my original offer.”

“Double nothing is still nothing. One seventy-five.”

Carrie snorted. “Are you putting in jeweled screws or something? Fifty credits final offer.”

Riki’s gaze flickered towards her display table, and then back at her. “I can’t take less than one fifty, but for that, I’ll also design a new, completely unique character for your caller.”

Carrie considered the offer. The caller on her current display had come with the machine, and was the usual generated character of a robot, that called out the specials as people passed. It saved on her voice and carried farther as well, but many other vendors had the same one and so it didn’t catch as many eyes as she’d like it to.

Her gaze moved to the display table, then turned back to Riki again.

“One hundred even, you have the new caller ready for the festival next week and...” She smiled knowingly. “You can have your pick of anything from the table.”

“Done.”

Her eyebrows rose as he eagerly popped up and reached for the prize he had already chosen, a set of bracelets made of a dark, glossy black metal that changed color depending on the person’s mood. The unique metal automatically reacted to a person’s body chemistry and when Riki picked them up they turned an instant bright blue.

Carrie’s hand flew to her mouth to stifle her laugh, because light blue meant Riki was incredibly excited at that moment, even though his outward appearance looked as stoic as ever. He was so cute sometimes!

She was both shocked and delighted when Riki showed up at her booth earlier that afternoon and said he’d gotten permission to do some work for her. Considering how fast he had worked on her machines before, she suspected he was deliberately taking his time with the display, perhaps to stave off the boredom of being a pet?

Remaining in character, Carrie scowled and grumbled. “I suppose you want them wrapped too?”

“Yes please.”

Carrie’s heart flipped over in her chest at the shy request and she barely resisted throwing her arms around him. Her loins reacted as she wistfully considered how great it would be if she’d had a kid just like Riki.

Instead, she stomped over to her packaging area and snatched a box. “Fine! But that caller better be amazing! Those bracelets aren’t cheap you know!”

“It will be, I promise.” Riki slid the bracelets in the box she presented, watched her put it in a bag with some tissue paper and adornments. “D... don’t go overboard.”

“Do I tell you how to fix computers?” Riki grinned and shook his head. “Then don’t tell me how to gift wrap a package.” She added a few ribbons and some sprayed flower petals that would remain fresh for at least a month. “It’s for Junpein, isn’t it?”

Junpein was the annual holiday in Tanagura, created solely to worship and offer gratitude to Jupiter for creating the Elites and all that surrounded them. Many of the more wealthy humans also participated, which was why there was a street festival that lasted for three days, as well as numerous parties, social functions and the like. They received visitors from all over during this time, and then on the fourth day, all of Jupiter’s children flocked to the Gem Tower to pay homage to their God.

Riki remembered from past years that Iason would be secluded in the tower with his brothers from sunrise on the fourth day, until sunrise on the fifth day. Iason never spoke of what happened during that time, and Riki had never asked. He realized, after their fight at Katze’s that Iason had been right. Iason had been trying to understand him and his ways, but Riki had given no real thought to Iason’s kind. They had never gone to the festivals, because Riki was too rebellious or uncomfortable, and while they had received numerous invitations to pet parties during that time, Iason chose to keep Riki at home. Riki had not even thought to be grateful for that small indulgence of Iason’s before. He wanted to do something special for Iason, to show that he had changed and he was serious about making things work between them.

“You there! Pet.”

Both Carrie and Riki glanced over to find the same security guard that had harassed them the last time appear, and their playful mood disappeared instantly.

“Seems you don’t learn your lessons well.”

“He has permission...” Carrie began, but Riki held up his hand.

“Save it, he doesn’t want to hear the truth.”

“Out. Now.”

Riki stared hard at the guard, hard enough that when he put his hand on the table and suddenly leapt to the other side the guard staggered back a step. “What now?” he growled.

“Now, we go see your Master.”

“He’s busy.” Riki was suddenly anxious about disturbing Iason again. He knew that Iason wouldn’t blame him; the Blondie was up to his neck again in work.

“He’ll have to make time, then, won’t he?” He grabbed Riki’s arm, painfully. “Now shut up and move.”

Both the guard and Riki were shocked when the man suddenly cried out in pain, and as they looked for the cause, they saw a small, thin hand had gripped the fingers on Riki’s arm and had twisted the guard’s wrist to a painful angle.

“Please pardon me, but is there a problem here?”

The guard’s eyes widened slightly at young blond boy before him. “You... Let go! That hurts!”

“I apologize for causing you pain.” Cal calmly applied more pressure, bringing the man down to one knee. “However I cannot allow you to manhandle my charge. He is my responsibility, you see, for I am his teacher and Master Iason does not allow anyone to touch what belongs to him.” Cal smiled blandly. “You can understand that I am just doing my duty, can’t you?”

“Y...yes. Yes! I understand, just let me go.”

“Of course.” Cal released the guard so quickly that he actually fell backwards on his ass. “Do you require medical assistance? Shall I call for a transport?”

The guard scampered backwards, whimpering when his injured wrist touched the ground as he scrambled to his feet. "I'll report you for this!" He hissed, cradling his wrist. "Who do you think you are anyway? I've never seen you here before? Just who do you think you fucking are?"

Cal stepped towards the guard, watched him instantly step back. "I merely wish to give you my identification." Cal indicated the pad on the guard's belt and waited as the man fumbled to pull the pad out with his good hand. Cal pressed his thumb to the pad and stepped back as the guard read the display.

Riki's eyebrows rose as the guard paled and he exchanged a curious look with Carrie, who was also watching the scene bewildered.

"This pet has permission from his Master to assist with the vendor's machines, if they require it and I, as his tutor, am here to supervise him. There should be no more misunderstandings, am I correct?"

Fumbling to get back the authority the kid had so easily snatched from him, while trying not to offend someone with such high clearance, the guard's eyes narrowed. "You weren't here, so of course I would assume something was amiss."

"I was over there, in the book store." Cal indicated the bag of books he had purchased. "I could see Riki clearly from the windows of the shop, which is why I arrived so quickly to end any ... misunderstandings."

"Well...well how was I to know that? All I saw was an unattended pet!"

"There are unattended pets all over the market place. I find it difficult to believe that with your keen eyes and..." Cal leaned forward just a bit to observe the small dots of color on the man's uniform collar. "Ten impressive years of experience you only managed to see one that required your attention."

The guard flushed at being both praised and insulted in the same damn sentence. "Make sure you stay with him, from now on."

“Pets are free to roam without a guardian, as you well know, as long as they have the permission of their Masters. I can quote the exact Pet Codes for you if you like, or you can add them to your suggested reading list in future.” Cal nodded regally. “Of course, if I can’t look after my student and protect him from unwarranted harassment...” He lifted his gaze and narrowed it on the guard. “What kind of teacher would I be?”

“F...Fine. See...see that you do.” The guard turned and stormed off.

“Do put ice on your wrist if you chose not to seek medical assistance!” Cal called out to him, then turned back to Carrie and Riki. “Hello.”

“Hello?” Riki repeated in disbelief.

Normally Riki hated for anyone to fight his battles, but he had been too stunned by Cal’s performance to do anything but stare. Was this the same kid who had nearly passed out when Iason had mentioned making him a ward? The same kid who just yesterday seemed so nervous and anxious about how he would fit here?

“Yes. Hello is the standard greeting. I can say it in twelve other languages if you prefer?”

Riki released a chuckle of disbelief that the young man was so fucking calm. “No...that’s fine.”

“I...I’m Carrie,” Carrie finally managed and held her hand out over the display counter so Cal could shake it. “You must be Cal.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss. Carrie. I must apologize for forcing you to watch such a brutish display.”

“Are you kidding! That was the most entertainment I’ve seen in years!”

Riki grinned as Cal, finally proving that he was the same, uncertain kid that had come back to live with them, flushed to the tips of his ears. “What are the books for?”

“For you, for your lessons.”

Riki's smile faded as he looked in the bag, there had to be at least a dozen books in there. "All of them?" He hadn't considered he'd have to read so much. Did Cal expect him to actually study?

"Yes. Much of the information we require cannot be found in the general data banks, but we may be able to glean what we need from these old books."

"I'm not gonna have to read all of them, am I?"

"Riki, you like to read."

"Novels, fiction, computer programs, not...that stuff."

"You don't even know what this stuff is."

"It looks boring."

"How can you say that when you haven't looked inside?"

"The covers look boring. There's no pictures."

"Your novels don't have pictures."

"On the outside they do!"

Cal stared at him. "Have you changed your mind? Do you no longer wish to have your teacher?" He lowered his head a fraction. "I can tell Master Iason, perhaps Katze still wants me..."

His words trailed off and Carrie smothered her laughter as Riki, looking torn, ran his hand through his hair. The blonde kid was one smooth manipulator. He had Riki in the palm of his hand, and the mongrel didn't suspect a thing.

"No. No, I do want you to stay and be my tutor," Riki assured with a discernable grunt. "I just...it looks like a lot of shi...stuff."

“We shall leave no stone unturned, no book unopened to find your answers, Riki.”

“Yeah, great.”

Carrie released her laughter, unable to hold it any longer against Riki’s dry reluctant reply. “Why don’t you both head back and hit those books?”

“I’m not finished with your display,” Riki countered.

Carrie picked up the display box, careful to include all the small bits and bobs that Riki had disassembled and set them in a large bag. She handed it over the counter to him, as well as the gift bag with the bracelets. “I’ll be closing soon anyway, and it’s a slow day, so take it home and work on it.”

“Okay. I’ll come back early...” Riki began.

“We’ll have studies first thing, Riki.”

“Can’t we do that in the afternoon, or the evening?”

“The mornings are best. The evenings you will be required to spend with Master Iason, and I shall need to do my own research and studying in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, but...”

“It is best to establish a firm schedule right away, don’t you agree, Riki?”

Riki sighed. He’d created a monster. “Fine. But I want my cake tonight.”

“Yes, of course.”

Cal had promised to bake a chocolate cake for him last night, but Bean reported that there was a problem with the second oven and he required use of the first one to prepare the evening’s meal which was a slow roasting rib dish that required several hours to bake. Riki suspected Bean was feeding them a line of horseshit and just didn’t want Cal in the kitchen, but rather



than put up a fuss he conceded to Iason's desert alternative and sent Cal for ice cream.

They waved good-bye to Carrie and headed back towards Eos.

"You seem to be feeling better than yesterday," Riki commented as they walked.

"I am."

Cal had decided to take Riki's advice and put everything he'd learned as a Furniture into being the best tutor he could be. It was still a position, a highly regarded one at that, which would take getting used to, but that would take time. He wasn't sure what to make of the guard's reaction when he gave his identification, and wondered if Master Iason had indeed registered him as his ward, or something more important. Well, such things didn't really matter. All that mattered was that he was of some assistance to Master Iason and Riki, and that he had a purpose again.

"Holy..." Riki turned suddenly, and darted across the market place to a cycle shop, to stare at the rotating window display.

A black aircycle with wings that looked like moving flames curling out the back and a high sensor optic windscreen. It had a shorter snout than the regular bikes he'd ridden in Ceres, and a double seat for a passenger.

"Riki..." Cal began when he finally caught up to his charge, then squeaked when Riki grabbed his hand and pulled him inside so he could get a better look at the bike. "Eeep!"

"Twin processors, dual thrusters, a stabilizing core and armored body!" Riki recited as his expert eyes studied the moving display. "Auto wind and rain cover, conversion to off road tactical and secret storage compartment!"

"It is an impressive vehicle," Cal agreed as he watched Riki reach for the bike, as if needing to touch it to make sure it was real.

“Hey!” A large man from behind the shop counter called. “No touching the merchandise!”

“Apologies!” Cal called back and gently caught Riki’s fingers before they could reach their mark. “Can you ride, Riki?”

“Yeah.” This was the bike. *The* bike that he and Guy had envisioned, right down to the flames and the weather option. But, how could it be here? How could he be seeing the dream cycle of two poor, mongrels from Ceres, on display in a shop in Tanagura?

“Riki?” Cal sensed an almost instant change in Riki’s demeanor, watched his wonder change to confusion and then sadness. “Perhaps Master Iason...”

“No.” Riki turned away abruptly and left the shop, not even checking to see if Cal was following.

Iason would never let him have that bike, because it would be considered a means of escape. Part of him still believed that Iason expected him to run someday. To be honest, part of him thought so too. If things ever got bad again, really bad, like they were before, would he still want to stay? Would Iason let him go or chain him again?

He glanced back only once and pain pierced his heart that Guy couldn’t be there to see it, that someone else had beat them to building their dream bike. Of course, he’d left Guy, even before Iason Mink, Riki had given up on their dream of opening an aircycle shop and designing their own bikes. Still, seeing the bike come to life brought back all the memories of him and Guy, the memories of his youth. He had thought he was done with them, that he had buried them.

Cal watched Riki’s changing expressions mournfully as they continued walking back towards Eos.

## Chapter 12

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki has another session with Jupiter and Iason learns more about Guardian.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone, thanks so much for the reviews, I hope you will continue to send me great feedback. I apologize up front if there are any typos in this chapter, but I was rushing to get it finished because I won't have the chance to write/upload for awhile and I wanted to give you at least one more bit to read.

*You seem distracted today.*

Riki grunted as the now familiar pressure of Jupiter's mind link entered his mind.

*Please try to relax.*

"I'm...trying."

*You are resisting.*

"I'm not ..."

The pressure suddenly ceased and Riki opened his eyes, startled.

Jupiter's hologram moved forward from her domestic spherical chamber, until she was directly in front of him. One long, multi-colored finger caressed his cheek and he felt it disconcerting to say the least. He could never quite understand how he could *feel* the touch of a holographic image.

*Are you sleeping?*

“Some...I keep having dreams.”

***Dreams from your past?***

“I’m not sure. I don’t always remember them, but when I wake up I’m...”  
He didn’t want to say scared, so he searched for another word. “Unsettled.”

***What do you do to settle yourself?***

Riki lowered his eyes and released the arm grips to pick at his fingers.  
“Nothing.”

***Then how do you calm yourself?***

He didn’t want to tell her that when he awoke Iason was usually holding him, talking to him and soothing him. It made him sound weak. “I just... settle down, once I’m awake. That’s all.”

***Our agreement is for honesty. Why do you break this rule?***

“I’m not!” How the hell could she even tell? Was she still inside his head?  
“How...?”

***Your heart rate increases when you lie. I would have you tell me the truth.***

“I don’t want to!”

***Why?***

“Because it’s embarrassing!”

***Why?***

Riki glared at the hologram. “It just *is* okay!”

***Do you masturbate to relieve the tension?***

Riki flushed. “No!” Although sometimes Iason’s soothing led to sex, but it wasn’t the same thing.

***If you reveal how you calm yourself after your upsetting dreams, I will create a more Human atmosphere for you to endure these sessions.***

Riki's eyes narrowed on her suspiciously. "If you want me to get naked, it ain't happening."

***I do not require such an act. Do we have an accord?***

Riki closed his eyes, sighed and licked his lips. "Would you still have to be inside my head?"

***No, however I would insist on complete honesty. If you lie, I shall know and the sessions will return to the mind fusion.***

Complete honesty? Could he even do that? He wasn't good at taking about his feelings, but he would prefer something other than Jupiter immediately jumping inside of his head all the time. "What if it's something I don't want you to know?"

***If I enter your mind, I would know the answers regardless. For this new solution, you need only reveal the answers to my questions and not all things that your mind covets.***

"And who are you gonna tell my answers too?"

***These sessions are for my private enlightenment. They will be revealed to know one.***

Riki chewed on his lower lip. "Not even Iason?"

Riki ran a hand through his hair, not trusting her, but not wanting her in his head again either. "What other way is there?"

***That shall be revealed once an agreement is reached, however it entails complete honesty. There will be no room for shame or deception. Do we have an accord?***

Riki figured he was getting the better end of the deal. "Y...yeah, I guess."

***Reveal your secret.***

I thought we were gonna do something different first?”

***The new solution is based on your forthcoming honesty. You must answer to accept the offered proposition.***

Crafty bitch, Riki thought briefly, then flinched as if he expected a punishment, but Jupiter merely waited patiently. Oh yeah, she wasn’t in his head any more. He tried a lie first. “Cal brings me a warm drink.”

***That is a falsehood.***

“Just checking.” He wet his lip and cracked his neck, shoving down his embarrassment. He had agreed to these sessions when they first returned to Eos, as it was part of the deal to staying with Iason, but Jupiter had allowed him several months reprieve, before stating the sessions, and even now they were only once or twice a month.

While the sessions could be uncomfortable, as anything would with something knowing your every thought, they weren’t as bad as Riki had envisioned they would be. They were intrusive and embarrassing, sometimes frustrating because Jupiter continued to prod when Riki gave an answer she didn’t quite understand; and he wasn’t great at explaining things either.

After she had breached the barrier that held the memories of his origin, he began to accept the sessions as a way to learn more about who he was. He and Cal were making progress, from what little he knew and could remember. The kid’s mind was incredibly sharp and detailed and they had already eliminated several planets as ones that Riki could not have originate from. There were still many, many more to go, and Riki knew he had to use Jupiter to finish unlocking his mind to learn the truth.

“Usually, Iason calms me,” he finally admitted.

***How does he do this?***

Riki shrugged, uncomfortable about admitting such things to anyone, especially Jupiter. “He just holds me, talks to me until I calm down and fall back to sleep.”

***And other times?***

“We have sex.”

***You have sex often with Iason, do you not?***

“Yeah.” Well, she wanted total honesty, so he would give it to her. “He’s a total nympho.”

***I do not understand this reference. Explain.***

“He likes to fuck. A lot.”

***He was content with watching pets fornicate with each other, before he found you. Why did his perception and choice change?***

“I don’t fucking know!”

Riki had lots of admirers in Ceres, some who wanted him because of his looks, others who wanted him because of the power they thought he might share with them, based on his reputation. Some had wanted him for darker reasons, to put him in his place, to get a hold over him and brag to others that they had got him on his back.

Once he figure out a system and started standing up for himself, those people became fewer and fewer, because *he* controlled who touched him and aside from Guy, Riki was always the alpha in these situations; he was never the one on his back, or on his knees. The only reason he was sometimes on his back for Guy was because as his pairing partner Riki felt it only fair to take turns being on bottom; to show Guy that he thought of him as his equal.

Then he had met Iason and everything changed. When Iason had saved him from those thugs, he had been humiliated and grateful at the same time. He’d had nothing to offer, nothing worthy of a Blondie, anyway, and so he

had offered himself. For the first time in several years, he had offered to let someone other than Guy fuck him. But Iason hadn't just fucked him, he had done so much worse. He had played with Riki's body in humiliating ways, made him lose control over himself in a span of minutes, just by the mere touch of a gloved hand.

Never, in his wildest dreams or worst nightmares, had he imagined that his offer, that this one demeaning experience would be taken as a contract to belong to Iason and be repeated over and over again for the next few years. And, it probably wouldn't have, if he had left well enough alone, but instead he spotted Iason weeks later while doing a delivery for Katze, and, looking for revenge against the Blondie that had robbed him of his pride, had foolishly followed him. He had been irresponsible and naive and it had changed his life forever.

***Perhaps you are a bad influence?***

"Me? I didn't ask to be a pet!" Riki countered, furious. "You want to blame someone, blame Iason, or better yet, blame yourself for creating a flawed being!"

***Iason is...flawed?***

Shit! A shiver of anxiety slithered down Riki's back and seemed to pool just below his spine. He hadn't meant to say that, not in that way. Had she never considered that Iason wasn't quite like the other Elites? Would this knowledge make her do something to the Blondie? Would she erase his memory, or disassemble him, or some weird shit because he was no longer perfect.

"I...I didn't mean that. I mean, Iason is really good at a lot of things...not Human things but android things and that is what you made him for, right?"

***My children were made to emulate Humans and improve the species.***

Riki stared at her stunned, "Are you shitting me?"

***I am incapable of creating excrement.***



Riki decided it was better for him not to get into a pissing contest over how Jupiter had completely failed in her so-called mission. How in the hell did she think taking Humans for pets and Furniture improved the species?

“And I thought Iason was fucked up.”

*Please explain that reference.*

“Nothing, Never mind. Are we gonna do this new thing or what?”

*Yes. What is your preference?*

Riki watched as several slides of landscapes and scenes suddenly appeared in front of him, everything from lakes, mountain trails, bustling cities and quiet towns.

“That one,” he said, picking a cityscape that reminded him a lot of the streets of Ceres and almost immediately the room transformed.

His chair became an unpainted iron park bench sitting on flat, grey concrete. Large, impossibly tall buildings grew up around him, as a thin roving line soon became a roadway through the holographic city. In the distance he could hear the typical sounds of people talking, the whining of police or medical response and the vibration of the city train as it passed overhead.

A young woman appeared before him with long white hair, gold eyes and dressed in a soft explosion of purple and red. “Is this to your liking?”

Riki slowly rose, even the bench felt real. “Is...is that you, Jupiter?”

“It is a facsimile I have created for this scenario.” She waved her hand towards the path. “Shall we walk?”

Riki, still slightly uneasy at how real everything looked, shoved his hands in his pockets and fell in step beside her. “This is...kinda cool.”

“Would you prefer a warmer atmosphere?”

“Ah, no. I mean it’s interesting; it looks real, it sounds and smells real.” He had played simulation games but they were nothing like this. It was as if he really was in Ceres. The homesickness hit him hard and fast, however when out of the corner of his eye he saw a young boy being dragged off the street and into an alleyway he realized it was too real.

“I...I don’t like this. Do something else.”

“I selected this scene from your memories.”

The terrified screams of the boy as he was being beaten and raped reached them. So many years he had seen that same scenario, hell he had lived that scenario, until he had gotten enough courage and enough strength and ingenuity to fight, or talk his way out of them. When he was younger he would automatically help the younger kids, or even kids older than him, but he was always outnumbered and then it was far worse for him.

He’d had learned to survive by ignoring the cries. Forcing himself to become desensitized to the violence had made him dead inside to every other emotion except anger and pride. He grew taller, stronger and gained a reputation that earned him respect. Few wanted to mess with him, and even when he did have to trade on a few sexual favors for something he really wanted, he was still always the one in control, the one with the upper hand. It hadn’t been humiliating because he had chosen it; he controlled it to get what he wanted. With Iason, he had no control, ever, not over his feelings, not over his body, and that was what had hurt the most. That was why he sometimes still felt shame when Iason held him.

“Shit,” he muttered and felt his eyes tear up, as if to spite him. Yet one more thing he had no control over.

“This will not do.”

“What?” Riki began turning towards Jupiter, and in that instant the entire scene before him changed and they were suddenly at the seaside.

He stared at the waves rolling back and forth across the white sand, confirmed that it was sand, because it felt soft and squishy under his boots.

The sound of the water, the slight scent of marine life and salt in the air made him inhale deeply and he was reminded of the Beach house.

“Your heart rate has slowed again. Is this better?”

“Yeah,” Riki murmured and turned to the vision of Jupiter, this time with the same face, only now she was dressed in some sort of flowing silver and gold sundress. “Thanks.”

“Why do Humans cry?”

He shrugged and started across the beach to hide his embarrassment. “Lots of reasons, I guess. Mostly because they are sad.” Although he tended to cry more when he was frustrated. He remembered a movie he had watched recently with Iason, about a pair of young lovers. “Some...sometimes people cry even when they’re happy.”

“Do you cry when you are happy?”

“No.” Maybe he would one day, though. He never thought of it before, what it would be like to cry for that sort of reason. “Usually, I’m just frustrated or angry and for whatever reason it comes out that way.” Although he never used to cry, over anything. Iason had changed him, Iason had been the first person to make him cry, both in pain and in pleasure.

He paused as he recalled his dreams, or whatever pieces of his memory the dreams inspired. No, Iason hadn’t been the first. His father...or whatever had taken his father, that had been the first time he had cried.

“I require...” Jupiter paused as if reflecting on her words. “I wish, that one day you are so happy that you cry.”

Riki, trapped in his thoughts, glanced at Jupiter, shocked. “W...why?”

“Then you can explain to me the difference from when you cry when you are frustrated.”

He smirked. Ah yes. He almost forgot. Jupiter was all about gathering more knowledge.

“You made the Elites to emulate Humans,” he began, curious. “And they all seem to have emotions already, so why do you need me to tell you more about this kind of stuff?”

“Emulating emotions and feeling them are very different. My children are good at affecting the required responses. They do not, as yet, have the experience or ability to feel the emotions they emulate.”

“Iason does. I mean, he seems gets angry pretty easy.” They were real, weren’t they, Riki wondered? Iason had said over and over again that he loved him, was that a lie? Was Iason just projecting what he thought he should be feeling?

“Iason is flawed. It is through these sessions that I would attempt to contemplate the extent of his inconsistencies.”

Again, that uneasy feeling settled in the pit of Riki’s stomach. Was talking to Jupiter like this setting Iason up to be punished in some way? Had everything Jupiter said been a lie, a trick to make him reveal too much? Desperately, he grasped for a way to turn things around. He didn’t want to lose Iason! He didn’t want Iason to go back to be the cold Blondie who originally kidnapped him.

“He....he’s not that bad, really. I mean...for a Blondie.”

“Do you enjoy having sex with him?”

Riki flushed. “W...what the hell kinda question is that?”

“A valid one, is it not?”

“No!”

“Why?”

“Because!”

“Explain.”

“It just...it doesn't matter if I enjoy it or not, does it?” he snapped. “It's gonna happen either way.”

“Why do you persist in hiding how you feel about such things?”

“I don't!”

“Are you feeling shame again?”

Her tone was almost sympathetic. In this form, she seemed softer, kinder. He preferred thinking of her as an entity instead of this beautiful, gentle woman. Instead of answering, he stepped onto a raised gravel area, and bent and selected three stones.

“A pet has no cause to feel shame or embarrassment for performing the duties of a pet.”

“Yeah, well...” He pitched one stone, watched it skip across the water, pleased. “I wasn't always a pet so...sometimes I can't always help feeling those things.”

“When a human feels shame it is due to a lack of confidence in some area. You are arrogant and prideful to a ridiculously high degree. This is a contradiction.”

Riki shrugged, unsure what she wanted him to say, and tossed another stone. “Having pride doesn't mean I wanted to be someone's pet!” Or that it didn't bother him when people looked down on at him.

“You offered yourself to Iason, did you not?”

“Not forever!” He turned and threw the stone at Jupiter, startled when it went through her. He forgot that she wasn't real, but hadn't she touched him earlier? It was all so bizarre. “That was supposed to be for one time, to pay a debt! I didn't expect him to fucking keep me prisoner!”

Jupiter picked up the stone at her feet, studied it. “You offer your body to others for payment, without shame, yet you feel shame when your body is used by others. This is illogical.”

“Yeah, well, Humans aren’t known for being logical.”

“Agreed.” She turned and threw the stone, watched it drop with a splash into the sea and scowled. “I chose to allow my sons to emulate Humans, yet there are still many things about your kind I do not understand.”

“You and me both,” Riki said as he skipped another stone.

Jupiter stared at her hand, until another stone materialized in it, then she threw it, and watched it sink through the waves. She turned to Riki just as he skipped a stone four times across the water. “Explain.”

He glanced at her, then crouched and selected some more stones. “Explain what?”

“The stone. How are you controlling it?”

He looked at the rock in his hand and felt a flash of something familiar, something that tickled his senses, but then it was gone. When had he learned to skip stones? There were no ponds or lakes in Ceres. He must have learned it at the beach house.

“It’s not hard,” he replied and threw the stone, watched it skip only twice this time.

“Show me.”

“I don’t fucking know! Just throw it.”

Jupiter threw another stone and watched it sink. She turned to him. “It did not jump. Why does it not jump across the water as yours do?”

Riki smirked, if he didn’t know better, he’d think she was throwing a snit, but her voice remained the same, calm monotone it always was. Was she annoyed? Could she get annoyed? “Um...just angle it, I guess, like this.”

He showed her his wrist and then reared back and flicked the stone across the water, grinning when it jumped five times. “Shit! That was pretty good.”

Jupiter created another rock and prepared to throw.

“Wait!” Riki moved over to her. “The rock’s too round, that’s why it’s sinking. You need a flatter rock, like this one.” He placed a different rock in her hand. “Now, pull back and...”

***“It’s all the wrist kiddo,”***

***Riki watched his father throw the rock across the water, watched it skip a total of seven times, then he squealed and clapped. “Again! Again!”***

***“How about you throw the next one.”***

***“Me! Me!”***

***“Ceil? It’s time to come in now.”***

***Riki turned at the musical voice, felt his heart rate increase in pleasure. “Mam...”***

Riki awoke with his head against something warm and soft. Opening his eyes, he turned his head and looked up at Jupiter, still in her Human guise while he lay across her legs. The beach was gone, and they were back in her chambers.

How did he end up on his back with his head in Jupiter’s lap? And why did she feel so warm? He bolted up into a sitting position, and almost lost his lunch.

“You are not recovered yet,” Jupiter said as she gently pulled him back into her lap. “Rest, Riki.”

“I...what?” What the hell? Weren’t they just skipping stones? “What happened?”

“Unclear. You were showing how to throw the stone, and you collapsed. It was sudden. I did not detect any disturbance in your heart rate or breathing.”

Riki slowly sat up again. "I...I think I had another vision...memory or something."

"Are you upset?"

"Not...no, I don't think..."

"Shall I contact Iason to come and fornicate with you?"

"No!" Riki flushed and scrambled to his feet. "I'm fine."

Jupiter rose slowly. "What was your vision?"

"Skipping stones. I think...I think my father was teaching me and then..."

"Then?"

He shook his head, it was gone now and only another headache remained. Damn it. While talking to Jupiter he had managed to get rid of it finally, and now it is back.

"Rest. We will continue at a later time."

"I...I'm sorry." He usually had been out for at least an hour, and he knew that it had barely been thirty minutes. Unless he was out for a good while. His last session ended abruptly too. "I know you probably didn't get much this time either..."

"On the contrary, I have gleaned a good deal of worthwhile information."

"Oh...well, okay." He looked at her, let himself relax a little in relief. "Thanks...for letting me go early."

She nodded. "You must take care of yourself, Riki."

"Yeah." He was sure Jupiter would be inconvenienced if he was sick and had to miss a session, must keep the lab rats happy and all that.

***Such a creature would be beneath my notice.***



She was back in his head again. “Huh?”

***You are not a rodent.***

Riki flushed. “Get outta my head!”

Something tingled through his brain and it gave him an intense sense of pleasure. Was that...Did Jupiter just laugh at him?

“Be well, Riki. For your own sake, as well as mine.”

He lowered his head, not sure what to make of Jupiter now, and moved towards the door of her chambers. He paused and turned back. “I...I like it...I like you this way. Can we do it this again?”

“Yes. We shall continue as long as you remain honest.”

He nodded, lifted a hand in a half-hearted wave and stepped out.

Jupiter stared after him for a long moment, then turned around and recreated the beach and tide. She selected a thin, flat rock, pulled back her wrist and threw it. It skipped twice and she smiled.

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Raoul turned, from where he was staring out Iason’s office window, as his friend’s console signalled an incoming message. He stepped to the desk and pressed the receive button, then felt an instant of pleasure shoot through him at the sight of a familiar red-head.

“Hello, Katze.”

“Forgive me, Sir. I was looking for Iason.”

“He just stepped out for a moment.” Raoul settled in Iason’s swing chair and crossed one long leg over the other. “Can I help you?”

“No. I needed only to speak with Iason.”

“Iason considers me a close and valued friend; surely you can rely on me to give him a message at least?”

“Please just tell him that I called.”

“So formal.” Raoul smirked. “Is that all?”

“That is all.”

Raoul leaned closer to the screen, put a finger across his cheek, thoughtfully. “Are you lonesome now that you don’t have your Furniture to keep you company?”

Katze stared at him and remained silent.

“I would be happy to take his place.”

“I’m fine.”

“If you are desperate for company you are welcome to drop by my lab any time you are free. An open invitation, if you will.”

“Thank you for the offer.”

“Are you declining or accepting?”

“Neither.”

“Ah, once a Furniture, always a Furniture. “ Raoul sighed and sat back. “You are absolutely no fun at all. I don’t know what Iason sees in you.”

“Loyalty.”

Raoul glanced towards the door as Iason entered. “Ah...like a dog, then? Really, Iason, how many pets do you intend to keep?”

“Katze isn’t a pet, he is an employee.”

“Not a very nice one. He doesn’t seem to like me, Iason. I am feeling very put out.”

“I’m assured that you will get over it. Now, get out of my chair.”

Raoul chuckled and rose so that Iason could sit down. “You both need to a sense of humor. I would be happy to offer my programing services.”

“Perhaps another time,” Iason said, with a small smile for Raoul, then turned to Katze. “What can I do for you?”

Katze’s eyes flickered to Raoul, standing deliberately behind Iason. “It’s about Guardian.”

Iason nodded and cast Raoul a look, telling him he wished to take the call in private.

Raoul simply smiled and leaned over Iason’s shoulder so he could see Katze better. “He still likes me best, Shadowman.”

Iason quirked an eyebrow amused and watched Raoul leave, then looked back at Katze. “Tell me.”

“You were right. In the past, there were traders selling kids to Guardian.”

Iason sat back and steeped his fingers. “How long ago?”

“I could only go back ten years, but as far as I could tell, it stopped about six years ago.”

“So there is no way to know how many children are off-worlders?”

“No.”

“From what I understand, Ceres is flooded with orphans, so why would they need to do this? Is it not just more mouths to feed?”

“You would think, but I found out that Guardian is set up with a certain amount of provisions and credits per child. I know that the kids there now

are a little better off, but before they didn't see even half of those provisions. The previous administrator had some shady dealings on the side and a gambling problem. He could sell off the extra provisions the state sent at a pretty good profit."

Iason was getting the grim picture. "And more children meant more provisions, therefore the only alternative was to get them from somewhere outside of Ceres."

"Seems like. I've still got a bit more digging to do, but I wanted to update you that the probability of Riki being one of those kids is at least half."

"Is the previous administrator still alive?"

"No, he died several years back, probably couldn't pay his debts from what I hear of what was found of the corpse."

"Is there anyone available to speak to that was there when Riki was living at Guardian?" Iason asked.

"I've got a small lead on a nurse, but she's proving difficult to track down. The turnover rate for staff is pretty high there, but from what I heard this lady was there for thirty years before she retired."

"I see. Well, do what you can and keep me posted."

Katze nodded. "Of course."

"Katze?"

"Yes?"

"How bad was it there, from the information that you have gathered?"

He wanted to know what Riki had gone through. He knew his lover had not had an easy life, and had passed it off before as unimportant because Riki was his now. But there was something unsettling about the idea that Riki was not from here and it made him want to know about everything concerning Riki.

“I only hear stories...” Katze began.

“I must know.”

“Iason...” Katze sighed, paused to light a cigarette. “It was bad. Even if the only half of the rumors are true, it was really bad. You don’t want to know anything else. Trust me. If you dredge that shit up it will just hurt Riki more.”

Katze’s words were logical, but Iason could not change the way he felt. “Let me know if you find that nurse and bring her to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

## Chapter 13

### Summary for the Chapter:

An unexpected meeting in the Marketplace and a less expected rescue

### Notes for the Chapter:

I feel like I am getting less comments on new chapters than I did originally, are y'all getting bored? Should I wrapp this story up, quickly then? :-) Just Kidding, there is a ways to go yet, and a third part coming after that! Hope you will all stick around to enjoy it.

Special thanks to Paladin (Nesrie), OHtheNovelty, giraffethellama, NegativeNein, fanfic3112, tomboyish\_dre, em, PrincessofTor for reviewing the last chapter. For those that have a fondness for Raoul, the second portion of this chapter is for you. Feedback really does inspire me to write more and post faster( whenever I can) so keep them coming!

“Oh.” Cal paused in front of the cycle shop and stared at the bike with painted flames.

He had seen Riki sad, angry, embarrassed, and most often frustrated, but he had never seen Riki the way he had been a couple of days ago, when he had looked at this particular device. He hadn't had the chance to decipher all the emotions his charge...no his pupil had been feeling, for they flickered faster than the Lunasa Light Flies, whose interior glow changed color every .0007 seconds.

Two emotions had stood out among the others, that he had easily recognized, and they had torn at Cal's heart. This aircycle, for whatever reason, had created such instant joy and wonder in Riki, but then it seemed to leave him with a great sense of sorrow. Cal couldn't understand how the same object could cause such conflicting feelings.

Riki had been quiet and sullen since that day in the market, and all too compliant in Cal's opinion, especially with Bean. Even this morning he went off to his standing appointment without a word or any fuss. Cal didn't know what the appointment was, the times and dates had been added into his calendar and he was informed that Riki would attend alone each time.

Riki's sudden melancholy worried Cal, so he headed to the market to find something to perk up Riki's spirits, and while there, he managed to scrounge up some more books. Riki had balked at the ones Cal had already purchased, yet between them they had managed to go through almost half of the books. Riki could be a voracious reader when it was something he was interested in, unfortunately Riki found nothing familiar in the planet descriptions they had gone through, and so they had managed to remove several worlds in their system from the equation.

However, while Cal truly wanted to help Riki find his origin, he'd realized that couldn't be their only subject. Riki's education was his responsibility now, and so he had to teach something more substantial. After all, what sort of tutor would he be if Riki was only learning about geography and solar systems?

He decided that Riki's home would have to be a side project among the other things he could and should be teaching. So Cal found some lesson books on subjects that he thought Riki might enjoy. Riki often listened to music, so he chose one with instructions on how to read and write music. Perhaps he could talk his new student into learning an instrument, or even writing his own song. That would certainly give Riki a sense of pride and accomplishment, wouldn't it? Perhaps then, he wouldn't continue to feel so inadequate and confined.

There had been a sale on cookbooks, and since Riki had expressed an interest in learning that particular art, Cal picked up three of them. Although, he suspected Riki only suggested the idea to irritate Bean, he would accept the challenge and put his all into it. While he already had thousands of recipes in his head, the books would be a proper guideline for Riki.

As a reward, he also purchased several fictional novels similar to the ones he had seen Riki read previously, intending to use them as an incentive for Riki to study properly. Upon studying the roles and rules of tutoring, he learned that rewards were an important part of encouraging a student's educational growth. Of course, knowing Riki as he did, he also had a bag full of the mongrel's favorite candy; food was always the easiest way to bribe Riki.

On his way home, he had been passing by the aircycle shop and couldn't help but stop and stare at the window display. Riki wanted this item, even though it seemed to cause him both joy and pain, and when he had suggested Riki ask Master Iason, the mongrel scoffed at the idea. Cal had to admit, he didn't think that Iason would allow Riki to have such a thing either, but still...it was the first time he had seen Riki show real interest in having something. He almost wished he had the money to buy it for Riki himself, but of course, he couldn't do that either.

“Cal?”

The young boy turned and glanced up at his Master, still somewhat disconcerted that the distance in their height wasn't what it once was. He didn't often see Iason in the market place. If there was something the Blondie wanted, he would send Furniture for it.

“Good morning, Sir.”

“Are you interested in aircycles?”

The young man flushed. “N...no, Sir.”

“Are you sure?” Iason asked, glanced at the window display. “You were studying this one quite intently.”

“It...I...” Cal struggled with betraying Riki's confidence and speaking truthfully to his Master. In the end, his training won out. “Master Riki was admiring it yesterday, and I was just trying to see what he liked about it.”



Iason raised an eyebrow and moved closer to the window display. “Riki liked this?”

A spark of hope flared inside of Cal. “Yes. He was most taken by it. I have never seen him react so strongly towards anything before.” Oh, buy it for him, Master! Won’t you please give him your trust and show how much you care?

“I see.”

Cal’s hope fell and he shifted the parcels in his arms, before quickly changing the subject. “Are you in the market to make a purchase, Sir? I would be happy to pick up an item for you.”

“Your arms are already quite full,” Iason commented, his attention still on the aircycle in the window. “Why do you not request delivery to the condo for your items?”

Cal didn’t want to admit he liked shopping and the feel of bundles in his arms. “I will do so next time, Sir.”

“Hmmm.”

Cal’s gaze flickered to the small crowd gathering. It wasn’t uncommon to see an Elite in the Tangura Marketplace, but it was rare to see this particular Elite. He began to worry for his Master’s safety and welfare. He wouldn’t want Iason to be bothered by anyone.

“I can have whatever you were looking for delivered to the condo, Sir, if you like.”

Iason finally turned and glanced down at him. “Are you shooin me home, Cal?”

“Oh no! Of course not, only...” Cal’s eyes again moved towards the people gathering and whispering. He saw a man move forward, and fully intended to intercept. Master Iason could not be bothered by commoner’s requests! “I would hate to see you inconvenienced, Sir.”

Iason finally noticed the crowd. He removed his dark glasses and gave them all a very hard glare, causing them to scatter almost immediately. Sliding his glasses back in place, he lifted a gloved hand and ruffled Cal's hair. "Your concern is appreciated, Cal."

Cal flushed to his toes at the praise and the touch of his Master.

"I was looking for a gift for Riki for Junpein."

He had reminded Riki of the upcoming festival, advising of the time he would have to be away from the apartment for that week. As Jupiter's favored son, the invitations for Junpein week had been coming in at an alarming rate and while Iason had fully intended to decline most of them, especially the pet parties, there were a few that he would be required to attend.

He had never expected Riki to go with him, as the mongrel had shown no interest in previous years, but when Riki nonchalantly inquired about what he should wear to attend some of the social functions; Iason took this as Riki's intention to attend at his side. Riki had also asked for the specifics about Monip-yion- an evening ceremony held a couple of hours before midnight outside the temple, before the Elites were pulled into seclusion with Jupiter. There was a gift exchange and a light meal for friends and those closest to you, as a way of showing gratitude to each other and for the creation of their God.

Cal's eyes widened as his Master continued to study the window display. Here was his chance, to suggest a gift for Riki, but what if Iason took the suggestion as interference? The aircycle would most certainly give Riki more freedom, but would Iason take such a suggestion as an insult, a rebuke to give his pet more? Oh, what to do? What to do?

He was so grateful to Riki for helping him find a place with his Master again, but he was also loyal to his Master. He was still, in all other aspects, a Furniture, so he had to remember his place. Oh, this was so confusing! Please just find your own conclusion, he pleaded to Iason, silently. Riki really wants that aircycle."

“He wants this so much?”

Cal blinked, several times at Iason, and horror crawled through him as he realized he had vocalized his last thought. “I...I...um...”

“Come now, Cal. You are not often speechless. Tell me, does Riki like this aircycle that much?”

Oh, to hell with it! “I have never seen his face light up with such joy, Sir.” Or such sorrow, but Cal had to believe that the sadness was because Riki never expected to have it.

“Hmmm.” Iason stroked his jaw, thoughtfully. “An aircycle would certainly give him more freedom, wouldn’t it?”

Was Iason asking his opinion? What should he say? If he said yes, would Iason know not to get the bike? If he said no, it would be a lie and he could be punished.

“An aircycle would make it easier to get around Tanagura,” Cal replied, carefully. “And...if he got into a spot of trouble, it would make for an easier escape.” He hoped appealing to Iason’s concern for Riki’s safety would convince the Blondie it was the right thing to do, however he still had to be completely honest, as Iason expected him to be. “He could also go quite far away, if he chose to.”

“Yes. It is all about choice, isn’t it?” Iason agreed. Choice and trust.

The idea that Riki could run from him with this hurt and angered him. He would find him again of course, there is nowhere Riki could hide that Iason wouldn’t eventually find him, but still, just the idea of handing Riki a way out of Eos, out of Tangaura disturbed him.

“Cal, am I a cruel Master, to want him with me always?”

“No, Sir. It only means that you care a great deal for Riki.”

“Yes. Do you think he will run?”

Cal was taken aback by the question. "I...I don't think even Master Riki knows that, Sir."

"Yes." Iason turned and regarded Cal intensely. "Yes, I believe you are correct. It all comes down to trust, doesn't it?" Perhaps that is what Riki had been telling him all along, that Iason had to trust that he cared enough to always return. "I do wish him to be happy. Do you think giving him this vehicle will make him happy?"

Cal considered the question. He knew little about relationships except for the psychology courses he had been required to take. He still could hardly believe he was even having this conversation with his Master. "I am ill equipped to answer that, Sir. I believe the bike will give Riki pleasure, but what makes others happy is not something I know about. I apologize for being unable to assist in your decision."

"What makes you happy, Cal?"

Cal blinked again, but answered before his brain could properly formulate the appropriate response. "Being here with you and Master Riki." He flushed again when Iason raised an eyebrow. "I...I am so sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? Is what you said untrue?"

Cal shook his head and stared at the parcels in his arms, unable to meet Iason's knowing gaze.

"I am glad you are back with us as well, Cal."

Cal's head shot up. "Really?"

"Of course." Riki was so much easier to deal with when Cal was around the young Furniture knew just how to get Riki to behave, in a way that didn't make Riki resentful, or even care that he was being manipulated. "I know that you are loyal to Riki, and I appreciate that, but I am also confident you will always tell me the truth, even when it means betraying him. I have too few people that I can rely on, so it is good to have you close."

“T....Thank you, Master.”

Iason caught Cal's chin. “You never need call me Master again, Cal. You are my ward now, not my Furniture. You may call me Iason.”

OH! Such an honor! He was not worthy! “I...I am unsure if I can...can do that, Sir.”

Iason released him and smiled. “Well, in time perhaps. Sir will do, if it makes you feel more comfortable, but do try to get used to using my name, won't you?”

Cal nodded, appalled to find that he was trembling. It was such an gift for a Furniture to be permitted to address their Master by their first name, Cal had only ever heard of it happening twice before, in all the history of Furniture's. He knew that Katze was permitted, but Katze was no longer Furniture so it could be accepted. The idea of someone like him addressing Iason by his name...it was too much to wish for!

“Good. Now hurry home and tell Bean that I wish you too cook your special Pastachuda, as a surprise for Riki. If he gives you any trouble, contact me immediately.”

“Oh yes, Sir!” He hadn't made that dish in quite some time, so he would have to run and pick up the ingredients. “I am sure Bean will not mind.” And if he did, Cal could handle him easily enough; after all he survived Riki's tantrums, hadn't he?

Iason watched Cal hurry off and smiled, then he turned and was about to enter the shop, when he found himself being knocked to the ground. There was a large crash from somewhere around him, and as he looked sideways; he saw the display window had been shattered.

“What?”

The person who had knocked him down scrambled up almost immediately and Iason was on his feet just as quickly, adjusting his clothes, and replacing the glasses that had been knocked off. He froze as his gaze

narrowed on the person before him, then his hand was around the Human's throat and lifting the man in the air.

“You!”

Guy's nails scrapped at the gloved hand that circled his throat in a vice grip as he gasped for air.

What the hell had he been thinking? He'd agreed to meet Shiao at this shop so they could meet the proprietor together, but then he spotted Iason Mink staring at the bike in the window. Instantly, rage had filled him, and he regretted agreeing to visit Amoi with Shiao on their tour. When the Onyx had mentioned it, Guy had foolishly hoped to get a glimpse of Riki or maybe give him the letter he had written, but instead he had run into his nemesis.

He'd been debating whether to run or to confront Iason when he spotted the shooter, and had reacted without thinking. He'd shoved Iason to the ground, preventing the Blondie from being shot, but he was definitely regretting it now as he dangled several feet in the air.

“Why?” Iason demanded. This irritating mongrel that had caused Riki such pain...How dare this person appear before him again. “Why aren't you dead?”

“I...I...” Guy couldn't speak because of the grip Iason had on his throat. Even with his mechanical arm, he could not come close to Iason's strength. He kicked out, made contact with Iason's legs but the attack had no effect on an android that could not feel pain. Fuck! Where was Shiao?

“Are you all right, Sir?” a guard asked, rushing toward them. “We saw her aiming at you with that disrupter, but were too far away to catch her before she fired. It's a good thing that fella knocked you out of the way!”

Iason focused on the two security guards a few feet away who were wrestling a woman to the ground. A laser disrupter fell from the assailant's grip, and Iason glanced back at the shattered window.

“Take her away, I will question her later.”

The guard nodded and hurried off as the shop owner ran out.

“What is happening? Who will pay for thi....” He saw the Blondie and Human in front of his shop, realized that he didn’t want to get involved and hurried back inside.

“You saved me?” Iason slowly lowered Guy to the ground, released his hold on the mongrel’s throat, but gripped Guy’s shirt, firmly preventing escape. “Why? Why would you do this? Why are you here?”

Guy hacked and coughed, trying to get breath back into his body. “Don... don’t know. I...I just...reacted.”

“Then you hadn’t intended to save me? Is that what you mean? You still want me dead?”

Guy knew he was in danger of being killed, and quickly back pedalled, trying to think of a way out of this mess. What would the Blondie want to hear?

“I...I...we both love Riki, and...and he would be devastated if he lost you.”

Iason’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Do you think this will somehow ingratiate you to me? That I will forget your crimes against us?”

“No. I don’t expect... what I did to be forgotten or f...forgiven.”

“What is it you want then? I will not allow you to see Riki.”

Guy felt despair pierce his heart. God damn him! God damn Iason Mink. Why had he saved him? Riki would be free if only this damn bastard was dead! “I...I don’t expect you to.”

“That what is it you expect?”

A faint glimmer of hope rose inside of Guy. Iason hadn’t killed him, or mangled him, yet, so maybe, just maybe he had a chance. Just one chance.

“A message.”

“What sort of message?”

Guy tried to reach into his pocket, but Iason’s grip on him interfered. “Can you let go?”

Iason did so, warily.

Guy wasn’t a fool, he knew he couldn’t outrun a Blondie, so rather than escape, which is what his mind was telling him to do, he reached into his jacket pocket for the envelope he had started carrying around with him since Shiao had convinced him to write the letter to Riki.

“I know you’ll read it,” he muttered as he offered the envelope to Iason. “I don’t care.” Maybe if he did, Iason might understand he was sincere. Although, he had his doubts the Blondie was capable of such compassionate judgement.

Iason stared at the envelope, but made no move to take it. “Riki is mine. All you have done is cause him pain.”

“All you have done is inflict pain on him!” Guy’s retort was out before he could stop it. “So I guess we’re just alike!”

“You and I are *nothing* alike, mongrel.”

“Aren’t we?” Guy huffed. “We are *both* obsessed with Riki.” He paused. “Were. I’m over my obsession now.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I just want him to be happy and live a good life.”

“He is well provided for.”

“I’m sure he is. I’m sure he’s fine with whatever you give him, since he chose to stay with you, but...” Guy shook his head. No, this wasn’t his business anymore and he couldn’t change pissing Iason off further. Where the hell was Shiao?



“But?” Iason prompted. “You have made no secret of your feelings in previous matters, why do so now?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I am curious. Speak your mind.”

“It doesn’t matter! You’ve already broken him, so there’s no point!” Guy could feel the guilt, rage and sadness start to overwhelm him again and fought to push back all those old, deadly emotions.

“You make him sound like a toy to be discarded when misused.”

“Isn’t that exactly what pets are to things like you?”

Iason considered the question well before answering. “Yes. To most Elites, and to me as well for a time. However, the moment I met Riki I knew he was different and I have treated him differently as well.”

“By torturing him? Brainwashing him?”

“I never tortured Riki, I merely trained him.”

“Like he’s a dog.”

Iason waved a gloved hand in dismissal. “You can never understand so it is a waste of time to speak of it. You claim to be his friend, to love him, yet you have no faith in him.”

“Faith!” Guy spat, furious again. That was *all* he’d had in Riki, faith and trust and love. And then Riki chose to return to Iason. Chose to have a Master. “The Riki I knew would never have agreed to be your fucking pet! He would have died first!”

“Riki’s sense of survival is much stronger than that.” Iason stepped closer to Guy, realizing that he and the mongrel were nearly the same height and disliking the fact that he couldn’t thoroughly look down on him. “You make it sound as if Riki receives no benefits from our relationship, when I assure you that he does.”

Guy flushed with embarrassment and anger as he recalled Riki pointing out his good spots. "I don't want to hear about your perverted relationship with Riki." He took a deep breath and stared at Iason, refusing to be intimidated. "Look, will you give him this or not?"

"I think not." Iason grabbed Guy's wrist in a fierce grip. "You have a new appendage. Shall we see if this one is as fragile as the old one?"

Guy felt a spike of hot fear shoot through him because Iason had grabbed his real arm; he struggled. He still had nightmares about the pain of Iason ripping his arm out of its socket. However, anger quickly replaced the fear and his mechanical hand clamped down on Iason's wrist, determined. He saw a flicker of surprise in Iason's eyes, and then cold calculation, before Iason's free hand wrapped around his throat again.

"Iason."

Both men turned to see an impossibly tall Onyx approaching.

"I would appreciate if you would not damage my employee."

"Employee?" Iason stared hard at the lower Elite, disturbed that for the first time he had to look up. He had seen this one before, but at the moment the Onyx's name escaped him. "This mongrel works for you?"

"He does, and I replaced his arm so that he could do what I need him to do. So, if you would be so kind as to release him, we will be on our way."

Iason hesitated just long enough to make both the Onyx and the mongrel understand that their lives stood in his hands, then let released Guy. "I see you too found a Master, mongrel."

Guy started to massage his wrist, there would be a horrific bruise there later from Iason's crushing grip but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing he might have broken the Blondie's grip with his new arm, if he'd had the chance. "I have no Master!" he hissed. "Shiao doesn't own me! He pays me a wage to do things for him. It's nothing like what you do to Riki!"

“Isn’t it?” Iason brushed some imaginary lint off his cloak. “I wonder what Riki will say when he learns what a hypocrite you are?”

“You motherfucker!” Guy lunged for Iason, but Shiao casually, but swiftly slid his arm over Guy’s shoulder and across the mongrel’s chest, easily securing him.

Iason was enjoying the intense hatred in the young man’s eyes, but when he lifted his gaze to the Onyx, deep jade eyes met ice blue with a surprising determination.

“A life for a life,” Shiao suggested, having seen most of what transpired, but unwilling to interrupt until it was required. Mink was the Elite after all, and he had to admit he was curious how Guy would react with the Blondie, after all he had heard. “I am sure your pet will appreciate you sparing his friend.”

“I have already spared him once,” Iason reminded, Guy coldly. “And in doing so Riki almost died.”

Guy swallowed, and lowered his head, ashamed. “I...I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“That is your defect, mongrel. You have no thought to the consequences of your actions. Riki would be far better off if you were erased from existence.”

“That is probably true,” Shiao agreed. He could feel his companion trembling in grief and anger. “Perhaps his future will hold such a prospect, but it is not for either of us to decide his fate, Iason.”

“No?” Iason held Shiao’s gaze. “Are you unaware of who you are speaking too?”

“I know who you are. Everyone knows, Iason Mink. What I am suggesting is that Guy and myself are only here momentarily and the chances of you seeing either of us again are slim. Do you really wish to cause such havoc during an instant of recognition simply for a past deed?” Shiao gave a

curious glance around, saw that there were people starting to gather again. “Especially among so many witnesses?”

Iason didn't really care what others thought of him, he was Iason Mink, who could and would do as he pleased. However, he did have to be careful of giving any ammunition to his new enemies. His gaze turned back to Guy. “If I see you again, I shall crush you so thoroughly that there will be no body left to replace.” His eyes narrowed on Shiao. “I don't care who you belong to.”

“Thank you, Iason,” Shiao offered diplomatically and tightened his hold on Guy, who was now vibrating with fury. “I will ensure that this does not happen again.”

“Do that.” Iason's icy gaze narrowed again on Guy as he held out his hand. “Give it to me.”

Guy's eyes widened as he realized what Iason was asking for and with a shaky hand, he placed the envelope in the Blondie's glove. “T...thank you,” he whispered and lowered his eyes again. He needed Riki to read his message, needed to know that he at least made the attempt so that he could let go.

“Don't. I am not doing this for you.” Iason pocketed the note, turned on his heel and marched away.

“I...I'm sorry,” Guy offered as Shiao continued to hold him, but remained silent several minutes after Iason had left. “I didn't mean to drag you into...”

“Your arm...” Shiao began, slowly easing his hold and turning Guy to face him. “The person who ruined your arm was Iason Mink?”

Guy shoved his hands in his pockets and nodded.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“How could I?” He was ashamed of Riki, ashamed of himself. He just wanted to forget all of it, but things kept happening to prevent that. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter, Guy. You are my companion, yet we only talk topics that I choose. You told me some of what happened, but there are obviously some significant gaps.”

“Yeah, I...sorry I guess I should have told you, but I didn’t know how to explain it.”

He didn’t want Shiao to know what a horrible person he was, the extent of what he had done to Riki, what he had tried to do to one of Shiao’s own kind. If the Onyx truly knew that about him, Guy was sure that he’d be tossed back into the slums again; that terrified him now.

“Well, let’s conclude our business here and get off this planet before Mink changes his mind,” Shiao decided and guided Guy towards the aircycle store entrance.

“I probably shouldn’t go in,” Guy stalled, remembering that the owner had seen him being harassed by a Blondie. “I mean...the fuss earlier...”

“Nonsense. That sort of thing often happens here. He must meet you, Guy, you are the designer of his bestselling product.” Shiao clapped his hand over Guy’s shoulder. “Trust me when I say, sales always come first.”

Guy swallowed again and allowed himself to be guided inside. He couldn’t help wonder, though, why Iason had been staring at his aircycle in the window. Had he been intending to buy it? He couldn’t picture the Blondie on such a vehicle, so did that mean maybe he was going to buy it for Riki? The idea of Riki riding their dream bike filled him with a moment of joy and satisfaction, and then, just as quickly, sorrow hit. It was a shame they could not ride it together.

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Riki noticed the three men dressed in black almost as soon as he entered the market place. The headache that was still throbbing painfully inside of his skull did nothing to dull his senses, and he picked up the tail behind him almost immediately. He'd seen the men twice before, once in the main city center, and again in the shop's quarter. Now they were following him again. They weren't Iason's men, he knew the flunkies that worked for Iason, which meant they probably worked for someone loyal to Orphe.

He wasn't in the best shape, and was regretting not going back to the condo as Jupiter had suggested, but he didn't have the energy to argue with Bean over the drugs the kid seemed bent on forcing down his throat at every opportunity. Instead, he had intended to check if Carrie was happy with her display, hoping that work would distract him enough to get rid of the headache.

Now he was in a situation that he really didn't need, but he felt confident enough in his abilities to deal with it. He didn't quicken his pace, or show any sign that he had seen the men, but instead continued to walk through the square with his hands in his jacket pockets. There was an alarm on the watch that Katze had given him, which would ring to Iason and Katze's pocket link in the case of an emergency. But, he wanted to handle this on his own. He just needed to find a place to lead them where they wouldn't draw any attention to themselves.

Right away, he thought of the Conservatory, but he didn't want to damage any of the plants inside. Besides, that was his one sanctuary in this place. Instead, he turned and headed for one of the older pet salons that he knew was rarely used because of the more modern ones available. He stepped inside and as predicted, found himself completely alone.

He pivoted on his heel and braced himself as the three men entered and closed the door. "And what can I do for you assholes?"

"You need to come with us." The smallest of the three said.

"Who says?"

"We do."

The shorter man nodded to the other two and they moved forward with a confident saunter, assuming that a pet would be an easy target. Riki slid his left foot back, turned his body slightly, as if he was about to run, which caused his first assailant to surge forward. Riki grabbed the man's outstretched arm, twisted, moved in almost to the assailant's chest, and elbowed the man in the throat.

As the first man dropped, a second man moved forward, Riki turned and delivered a spinning kick to his face; he went down hard and didn't move, but the first man was already back on feet and moving forward with furious intent.

Riki dodged the punch aimed at him, caught the man on the chin with a swift uppercut, then turned and kicked out at the third man as he joined the fray. The third man caught Riki's leg and twisted, attempting to throw him off balance, but Riki knew that trick and he pushed off with his free leg to throw his entire body into a spin, rotating out of the hold so that his foot caught the man in the temple on his way free.

He landed in a ball and rolled to his feet. "Who's fucking next?" he growled, enjoying the surge of adrenaline churning through him. He hadn't been in a fight in years. He was a bit out of practice, but instinct took seemed to be taking over.

The second man managed to get his arms locked around Riki, but Riki used the man's stance against him, pushed back and kicked at the first one coming towards him again.

"Enough of this!"

Riki didn't have time to prepare for a fourth assailant, because a jolt of electricity shot through his body and he felt himself falling.

"How can you not handle one stupid mongrel?"

Fucking cheater! Riki wanted to cry, but his mouth wasn't working, in fact his body was ignoring all his orders to move.

“Not so hot now, are you?” One of the men sneered and kicked Riki in the stomach. “Come on, fight back you piece of shit!”

Riki felt each and every blow from the man’s foot, but he couldn’t move out of the way, he couldn’t even curl up to protect himself.

“Stop!” A young pet with silver hair ran in and threw himself over Riki’s prone body. “You’re not allowed to do this!”

The man who had been kicking Riki grabbed Anjell up by the scruff of the neck and tossed him aside. “This has nothing to do with you, In-bred.”

“Be careful,” the one with the taser said. “Don’t permanently damage him.” He looked down at the mongrel on the floor. “Pick him up.”

“No!” Anjell again tried to intervene as he watched Riki being hefted onto the tallest one’s shoulder. “Leave him alone!”

Again, the young boy was shoved away, but as if he was made of rubber Anjell was on his feet again and grabbing at the tail of Riki’s shirt. He yanked at the mongrel with all of his strength, pulling Riki down on top of him, and simultaneously knocking the man holding his friend off balance; the three of them landed on a pile on the floor.

“Damn pets!” the tall man growled as he scrambled up and reached for the wand at his side, aiming for Anjell’s back as the small boy plastered himself protectively across Riki’s body.

“I won’t let you take him! He’s my friend! I won’t let you!”

The scream from Anjell as the wand touched a patch of exposed skin, easily found in the revealing pet clothes, resonated through Riki and enabled him to shake off some of the effects of the taser.

“Mother...fucker!” he ground out, as he managed to lift himself just enough that he could backhand the assailant. He crawled towards Anjell and curled himself around the sobbing boy, then hissed as the short man pulled his wand and pressed it to Riki’s legs.



“Get up!” the man ordered, but Riki, despite the pain screaming through him, only grunted and curled tighter around Anjell.

“F...uck you.” Why had the kid even gotten involved? Where the hell had he even come from, the parlor had been completely empty? “Stupid...I told you to stay....away.”

“S...sorry,” Anjell mumbled, his sobs quieting even though his body still trembled as if he was connected to an electric panel.

“Hit him again!”

The leader moved in with the taser again, then was startled when several other pets, of both sexes suddenly appeared and stood in his way.

“He belongs to Master Mink!” A young girl with red hair cried, as she threw herself over Riki and Anjell, and was quickly shielded by two other young male pets.

Of for the love of fuck! “Get...off!” Riki growled, shocked and angry that more were getting involved. What the hell was wrong with these kids? He tried to move again, but now it was bodies keeping down instead of the after effects of the taser.

“We have permission to take him,” The fourth man said, calmly.

“From his Master?” A brown-haired pet demanded.

“Yes, now move.”

“No.”

“Fine. Pets that don’t listen need to be disciplined.”

Two other men pulled out their wands and moved forward. The two male pets, scattered, leaving just the girl to protect Riki. Frozen in fear, the girl began to shriek.

“Fuck! Shut up!” Riki screamed at her as he tried again to move, but at that moment the wand hit the girl and as she failed to get away, her foot caught him hard across the head, disorienting him further. Before he could recover, he felt a shock at the back of his neck and darkness claimed him.

“What exactly is going on here?”

Everyone spun around to see a tall blondie and several other Elites standing in the doorway of the pet salon.

“Master, Raoul!” The brunette, who had been willing to protect Riki, until it was evident he was about to get hurt, cried and hurried out from the corner where he had been cowering. “They’re trying to take a pet! They say they have permission, but I don’t think they do! They used wands without perm...”

Raoul held up a hand. “Enough.” He moved through the doorway to the pile of bodies on the floor, toed the sobbing girl off the pile and immediately recognized the body underneath. “Why am I not surprised?”

“The pets are overreacting,” the leader of the assailant’s said. “We were outside and heard them fighting.”

“Yes. We were trying to break up the fight,” the shorter man agreed. “Since everything is in order now, we’ll be going.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Raoul crouched by Riki and lifted his hand, without bothering to look back. The other Elite’s immediately took the men into custody. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?”

Raoul scowled when Riki didn’t respond with one of his usual vulgarities. “Here, mongrel.” He shook Riki’s shoulder and found no response. “Stop playing, pet.” He put a gloved finger to Riki’s neck felt a flickering pulse. “Riki!” He glanced over his shoulder then. “Get them out of here,” he demanded of the other Elites. “Discretely.” To the lingering pets, he waved his hand. “All of you, go home to your masters and do not speak of this to anyone, or I’ll wipe the minds of every single one of you.”

The pets scampered away, two of them carrying the young girl who had been injured by the wand. Raoul took Riki's arm, intending to lift the mongrel over his shoulder, when he noticed the second boy underneath, who had also passed out.

He sighed. "What is this, a two for one day?" He slung Riki over his shoulder, then slid his arm underneath Anjell and carried them both out. "Honestly, pet. I am always picking up after you."

Walking along the corridor only a short ways, he placed his hand on a wall panel and a beam of light scanned his face. A section of the wall opened and inside was an archway portal. Raoul stepped through and disappeared to his chosen destination.

When Riki awoke, he did not recognize the stark white ceiling above him. What the hell? He started to sit up and realized he was strapped to a table. What the fuck! "Hey! Hey!" He struggled, but the bindings were too secure. "Hey!"

Had he been taken by the men and was now their captive? He couldn't really remember much past the other pets coming in. He couldn't be here! They would use him against Iason somehow, they would use him to hurt Iason and he couldn't let that happen! Why hadn't he just gone home? Why hadn't he pressed the damn button on the watch? Shit! Shit! SHIT!

He was bound so securely that he could only turn his head side to side, and when he did, he realized that his face actually hurt. What he saw caused the pain to intensify tenfold.

Computer consoles, trays of strange looking instruments and several other medical tables. Against the far wall were tubes with something large and long floating inside, surrounded by an iridescent green liquid. He was too far away to tell what exactly was inside the tubes, but his imagination was enough.

"Ah, you're awake."

Riki turned his head back the other way and fear snaked through him like slow draining molasses through a thin, filtered pipe.

“R...Raoul.”

Raoul offered a feral smile and leaned in close enough that Riki’s eyes almost crossed at their sudden intimacy. “I told you I’d get you in my lab, sooner or later.”

Riki was glad he’d hadn’t had anything to drink in a while, because if he probably would have pissed himself. “Let me go.” His voice had none of the bravado it usually did, in fact his demand was more of a whisper.

Raoul straightened and moved to pick up an instrument from a tray behind him. “I’m not finished with you, yet.”

Riki actually started to shake. Kidnapping would have been better, anything would have been better. “D...don’t...” he began as Raoul bent towards him again with some sort of laser tool. He hated the plea in his voice, and his hatred fed his anger and allowed him to push away some of his fear. “Don’t you fucking touch me you piece of shit!”

Raoul smirked and ran the laser tool across Riki’s cheek, impressed when the mongrel willed himself not to flinch. “Is that any way to talk to your rescuer?”

Riki had expected pain, but it was just a mild sting and then the laser left a soothing streak across his cheek. “Huh?” he asked, confused.

“Don’t you remember being attacked?” Raoul asked, then caught Riki’s chin firmly in his hands, preventing movement as he moved forward again with the medical tool. “Careful, I would *hate* to accidentally cut your throat.”

Riki gritted his teeth as he felt the sting, and then once more the soothing sensation. “W...what are you doing?”

“Healing you, idiot.”

Riki watched Raoul straighten and select another tool, this one he recognized as a medical scanner. What was going on? “W...why?” he asked, confused.

“I couldn’t send you back to Iason in the state you were in.” Raoul ran the scanner over Riki’s body, nodded and set it back on the tray. “Good, the cytokine has adapted and your serotonin levels are back to normal.”

Riki again pulled at his bonds. “If...if you were helping me, why am I tied up!”

“Because *I* am helping you.” Raoul pressed a button on the bed panel and the bindings released. “Or do you deny that your initial reaction when you realized where you were and who you were with was to flee?”

Riki slowly sat up and slid his legs over the table. He couldn’t deny Raoul’s charge, as that had been his initial instinct. “You...That’s your fault!” he snapped, angry at his own reactions and feeling foolish enough to have felt that much fear. “T...talking about wiping my mind and shit!”

“Of course.” Raoul turned suddenly, placed his hands on either side of Riki on the med-bed, effectively trapping the mongrel. “But since you’re here, care to partake in an experiment or two?”

Riki swallowed hard. “Don’t fuck with me,” he ground out, and couldn’t help noticing that Raoul actually smelled good, really good. Iason didn’t wear cologne, but Raoul obviously preferred it. He suddenly felt himself getting hard and flushed. Shit!

“Do you like it?” Raoul whispered in Riki’s ear, causing the poor mongrel to shiver slightly as the Blondie glanced down. “Ah, I see that you do.”

Riki tried to cover himself, but Raoul caught his wrists and held them to the bed. When he tried to struggle, Raoul simply pinned Riki’s wrists above his head with one hand.

“Ssshhh. I am not interested in your body, pet, I am simply studying its reaction.”

“W...what did you give me?”

“Nothing, it’s what I am wearing.”

The cologne! Raoul was wearing some sort of chemical to induce sex?

“Why?” Riki asked as Raoul’s kept his hands pinned.

“Assist me with my experiment and I will let you go.”

Riki knew he couldn’t beat a Blondie’s strength, so he let himself go lax.

“What...what do you want?”

“How does it smell?”

“Smell? It...it smells nice...I guess.”

“What does it make you think about?”

Riki hadn’t been thinking about anything except that it smelled good, at least until he had a physical reaction. “Not sex!” he retorted.

“Is it a sweet smell? Is it spicy, sour?”

“Can’t you fucking tell?”

“No. My sense of smell is limited, due to my work.”

Riki rolled his eyes once again struggled then fell back again. Sonofabitch.

“S...spicy I guess. I guess it smells spicy, now can you let me the fuck go?”

Instead Raoul seemed to study Riki more intently. “What is it?” he demanded, quietly. “What does Iason see in you to make him risk so much?”

Riki didn’t have an answer, he was still struggling with that question himself, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Raoul. “I’m a really good lay.”

“Hmmm.” Raoul slid a gloved hand down Riki’s chest, experimentally. “You do not feel all that different from other pets. Your pigmentation and

eye color is certainly exotic, but not especially rare.”

Riki tried to pull away from the Blondie’s touch. “I...Iason will kill you if you t...touch me!” He hated hiding behind Iason’s possessiveness and proving that he was property of a Blondie, but threats were really all he could use with Raoul, threats about what Iason would do.

“I am not hurting you, am I?”

“He doesn’t like anyone fucking touching me!”

“Because you’re his pet?”

Raoul smirked when Riki refused to answer and just glared at him, then straightened and released him. He picked up a data pad and made some notations, then reached forward as Riki started to sit up, surprised when this time Riki did flinch, and smiled as he pulled the small data recorder off Riki’s neck.

“I suggest you wait another while before returning home.” He eyed Riki’s obvious erection through his tight black jeans. “Unless you plan on explaining that to your master?”

“Fucking psycho bastard!”

“Now, now.” A thin blond haired girl approached with a glass of liquid on a tray. “Ah, there you are, Patricie.” He took the glass and waved her away. “You may go. I will come and play with you later.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Drink.”

Riki shook his head and refused to take the glass Raoul offered him.

“I have no need to drug you this way, pet. Had I wanted to do anything like that...” He smiled again. “I would have done so while you were unconscious.”

Riki shivered and tried not to think of Raoul's hidden threat. How long had he been out? Had the Blondie done something nefarious to him while he slept?

"It is only a juice to help your energy level after your assault." When Riki still refused to reach for it, Raoul set the glass on the table by Riki's hand and settled at his desk. "Had you seen those men before?"

"Yeah, a couple of times."

"Did you mention this to Iason? That you were being followed?"

Riki shrugged and swallowed, finding his throat impossibly dry for some reason. "I didn't think much of it the first time, the second time, well...they didn't do anything but follow me, so I had no proof they were up to anything."

"And this this time?"

Again, Riki shrugged. "I dealt with it."

Raoul typed something into his computer. "Patient experiencing delusions of grandeur after assault."

"Oh shut up!" Riki grabbed the glass, sniffed and then took a small sip, surprised that it actually tasted okay. A little tart, but not bad. "I could have handled three of them." He hadn't expected a forth, or that other pets would get involved. Anjell. "How...Are the others okay?"

"Yes, they were mostly just scared."

"What about Anj...the little kid with the silver hair?"

Raoul continued to type, but Riki knew he was working on something else, other than his patient chart. "I treated him and returned him to his Master."

"Is he gonna be in trouble?" He couldn't believe that Anjell had jumped in to protect him like that. Stupid kid. And then he had gotten hurt! All



because of him. He had warned him to stay away, why hadn't the kid listened?

"No. He was in perfect health when I returned him, so there was no need for his Master to question it, other than I accompanied the pet home to speak with his Master."

"Oh." So, Raoul could be compassionate? Who knew? "What about the others?" He couldn't remember all of what happened, other than the pets piling atop him, and at some point someone had a wand.

"Don't worry about them." Raoul turned in his chair to focus on Riki, pleased that the mongrel had finished all the juice. "I must ask you not to discuss this situation with Iason."

Riki's eyebrows rose. "Why?" He hadn't intended to tell Iason, he knew that the Blondie would become overly protective again, but he was surprised that Raoul wanted to keep it from him.

"Someone shot at Iason earlier this morning."

Riki leapt off the table. "What? When? Who? Where is he?"

Raoul rose and caught Riki before the mongrel could rush out. "He is unharmed and they have caught the perpetrator, she is being questioned now. I also have those that assaulted you and will be questioning them shortly."

"Then...why don't you want Iason to know?"

"There is a conspiracy going on here and I mean to find out who is behind it. Iason's protectiveness of you is getting in the way of my investigation, so I would prefer that he not know about this incident."

Riki regarded Raoul warily, then shook the Blondie's hand off his arm. "You want to use me as bait," he realized. "I can't be if Iason locks me up in the Condo again."

"Correct."

What a cold-hearted bastard! Riki almost smiled, because he had actually been thinking along the same lines, even before this happened. “Who do you think it is?”

“I have a few suspicions, but I need proof. It would behoove you to assist me with getting what I require.”

“And keeping Iason out of the loop entirely?”

“Regrettably, yes. I will tell him, once I have my proof, but I believe it is better to withhold the information at this time.”

Riki smirked and crossed his arms over his chest, haughtily. “You do realize if he finds out he’ll skin both of us?”

“He will be understandably upset, and I do not enjoy betraying his trust, however I am doing this for the greater good.”

“What’s in it for you? I know you don’t care if anything happens to me, so why are you being so helpful?”

“You are correct. If I had my way I would erase you from existence, however Iason cares too much about you. He is my friend, and I would never do anything to cause him distress.”

“Don’t you think lying to him like this will cause him distress? You know he hates not being in control of everything?”

“Yes, but this will benefit him in the end, so I must trust he will forgive my actions in time.”

“Do you have a plan?” Riki asked. He did not want to be allies with Elite, but if it was the only way to get rid of these people that were bent on hurting Iason, maybe he had no choice. He didn’t like or trust Raoul, but he knew that Iason did, and right now that would have to be enough.

“I do.” Raoul rose and held out his hand. “Shall I take it that you are willing to help me deceive your Master?”

“He’s not my Master,” Riki replied automatically, then cautiously lifted his hand to Raoul’s. “If this ends up hurting him or getting him killed, I don’t care who or what you are, I will fuck up so bad they won’t even want to recycle you.”

Raoul smiled as they shook hands. “I look forward to it, *Riki*.” He guided Riki to the portal of his lab, coded in a special code at the side that hid their destination. “Now, off you go.”

“Wait!” Riki swallowed as his gaze moved to the tubes of liquid on the wall. “What...are those?”

“You don’t want to know,” Raoul assured and gave Riki a mild shove through the portal. He watched the mongrel evaporate, knowing that his patient would reappear just outside Iason’s condo then turned back to his lab.

“Master?” A young Furniture appeared. “Shall I prepare your lunch?”

“In about an hour,” Raoul said as he walked over to another desk and pulled open a drawer. He retrieved a leather satchel, untied the ribbon binding it and let the leather unfold. The bright lights of the lab shimmered against the polished metal, as Raoul selected three of the tools. “I’ll be done by then.”

The Furniture nodded. “Very good, Master.”

Raoul walked over to the far wall and pressed a code into the panel there. A hidden door opened and he stepped inside to study the four men strapped to the tables there. He could smell their fear as their wide eyes settled on him.

“Now then, let’s begin.”

The door slid shut on the first man’s screams.

## Chapter 14

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki comes home, Iason ponders about Guy and Bean and Cal face off in the kitchen

Iason sat back in his office chair, slowly folded Guy's letter and placed it back in the envelope. "I should have killed him."

The urge to throw the letter in the disintegrator was strong, very strong, but he wondered if there might be some way to use this against Riki's old pairing partner. He had not expected Guy, of all people, to be working for an Elite, and an Onyx at that.

The Onyx breed were Jupiter's first attempt at creation, after she had effectively rebelled against her Human creators, but they had been filled with flaws, both physically and mentally. Some had been made too short, while others were far too tall, at least compared to their Human counterparts. A few were overly emotional while others were too mechanical; it was rare to find one that had a decent balance. Most had such a poor imbalance that they were destroyed shortly after creation.

Despite this Jupiter continued to search for a proper mix, and when she believed she had found one, she had them created them en-mass. The newer versions were all the same height, exactly 5'11 inches. Their emotional balance was created by removing the baser emotions and replacing them with a need for order and a desire to lend aid. The new Onyxes showed an aptitude for business and negotiation, so with their keenly superior intelligence and dedicated desire to serve Jupiter had a near endless supply of strong bodies that helped lay the foundation for Tanagura.

The Onyx controlled all traffic going in and out of Amoï, and became known as the Face of Tangaura. They became the liaisons between Jupiter and the remaining Human factions that she wished to subjugate. Her wishes were filtered down for them to obey, and they remained her strong and obedient soldiers.

The Blondies of course were the highest end of Jupiter's creation, and oversaw everything that the lower Elite's did, while maintaining strict control over the Humans they lived among. Because Humans were a species afflicted with greed and a need for power, it was not difficult to put those particularly selfish Human's into higher positions over their own people, so that order was effectively maintained. Of course, their power was an illusion, and could be removed at any time by any of the Elites.

Once Jupiter had her hierarchy created, she sent several of the Onyx off world to serve Jupiter's needs on other planets and to increase their trade and revenue into Tanagura. She insisted that the Onyx live in Human areas where they could do the most good, serving as judicial counsel or business mediators. There were still plenty around Tanagura, even with so many scattered across the galaxy, handling the mundane things like paperwork, licenses and real estate requests.

The moment he returned home, Iason had checked with his contacts and learned that the Onyx protecting Guy was named Shiao and that he spent most of his time off world as a mediator for several import and export companies. That also explained why Iason found his face familiar; he had no doubt seen the Onyx's profile in a shipping or contract file for one of his own side businesses. This Shiao was unique, however, and was obviously left over from the first generation that Jupiter had created.

This was a surprising notion, as once the Emerald, Ruby's and Sapphire's were created, the new Onyx were delegated to more administrative tasks, while these colored Elites became their supervisors and counselors of The Onyx. Also through them, it was believed that all remaining Onyx of the original series were secretly removed and terminated, under Jupiter's direct orders.

The fact that this one Onyx had managed to escape the purge concerned him, not because he felt any particular ill towards the Onyx, but because there was so little known about the originals, as they had been so quickly destroyed by Jupiter, melted down as a failed experiment to make room for the second generation. That made Shiao an unpredictable variable. While the Onyx seemed stable enough, it made Iason wonder what was under the

surface. He disliked not knowing everything about a figure he may have to deal with.

According to the information Iason gathered, Shiao also owned several of his own companies, which was unheard of for an Onyx. While they were still considered Elites, few Onyx actually owned property or headed a business. They were created to increase commerce and industry, but as the newer models were not blessed with the same emotional attributes as their high-end brothers, few felt a need for material goods or companionship.

Most Onyx did not participate in the pet shows or other such social activities, unless it was to work out a business transaction, or as a show of support for an Elite they were assisting. They did not get aroused watching the humans fornicate on stage, since their baser emotions had been effectively removed. This was before Jupiter discovered that as long as she gave her children an outlet for these emotions and voyeuristic tendencies such emotions could easily be kept under control. The pets kept her sons at a balanced emotional level, to allow their intelligence and good judgement to win out over their more Human feelings.

There had been no mention of the lower Elite living with a Human companion, but then, he couldn't really get any solid information on Shiao's personal life, not even a confirmation of which planet Shiao considered his home base. It certainly wasn't Amoï, or any of the closer planets in the system, because if it was Iason could have known everything about him within an hour of requesting the information.

Not being able to find or watch the Onyx, especially since Guy was now with him, concerned Iason. He'd contacted one of his people and tried to put a tail on Guy and Shiao, only a few moments after he had left the cycle shop, but by the time his man had arrived, both the Onyx and the mongrel had disappeared. There had been a record of them leaving Amoï in a personal shuttle, but, suspiciously, no destination had been recorded.

Iason would have to increase the spread of his contacts to the outer rim of planets. It was imperative that he know where Guy was at all times, especially if he had an Elite protecting him. Iason wasn't worried about

Shiao, he could deal with one renegade Onyx, if it came to that, but he didn't like the unpredictable mongrel having any sort of support.

He stared at the envelope in his hand and recalled what Katze had said about Guardian. Jupiter had identification chips installed in all of the Humans, so that she could always know what they were up to. Those that rebelled against her will were eventually displaced to Ceres and had their identification tags removed, effectively deleting them from the planet's registry. Without this form of identification, those that would soon become known as the Mongrels of Ceres could not get a job, were not permitted to live or linger in cities outside of their own, and eventually their society began to decay.

Iason was head of the Syndicate, that had secretly engineered the births of those living in Ceres to remain mostly male, to avoid an overflow of population and to keep the Mongrel's dependent on a inflicted life of Stout addiction and homosexuality in order to survive. Jupiter had believed that this was necessary to keep the Humans from considering any sort of rebellion again, and it seemed to work. Also, the decidedly male population offered the Elites an endless supply of willing boys for pets and Furniture; boys who would do anything to escape the life of poverty in the slums.

Such a decision had never bothered Iason before, it was created out of a necessity of order, and it was a wish of Jupiter so could not be questioned. Outside of his pets and Furniture, Iason had rarely given the Mongrels of Ceres a second thought, until he met Riki. He still didn't know what had possessed him to step in and interrupt Riki and that brood of Midas hooligans, when normally he would have walked away without notice. Why had he decided to follow the mongrel to that hotel room in Midas and accept the boy's offer of repayment? Amusement? Curiosity? Perhaps.

Whatever had been the reason, the incident was an unpredictable adventure in his usually predictable life, and once he'd had a taste of Riki's body, once he had touched that young, lithe, rebellious body, his life had been changed forever. For the first time, he found himself preoccupied with something other than his work. He caught himself thinking about Riki several times through the day, remembering how the boy felt beneath his gloved fingers,

how the Mongrel had reacted to his touch. It had been intoxicating and unlike anything he had ever felt for another pet before.

Because Riki was a Mongrel, and so unregistered, Iason could find very little information about him. He'd had to rely on Katze to glean what he could from his contacts, and once the black-market dealer had made contact with Riki, Iason had suggested that Katze offer the boy a job. This gave Iason an opportunity to keep an eye on Riki, but he had not expected to see Riki on a delivery in Tanagura, nor that the boy would foolishly divert from his work to follow him.

It had been providence for them to meet that way again, and Iason wasn't about to allow this second chance to slip through his fingers. He had immediately taken the boy as his pet, against Riki's will of course, but even the routine of training Riki had been thrilling. He had never felt such pleasure before. Riki had been rebellious, angry and unpredictable, and yet his body still responded so incredibly to the merest touch. It had been like Ambrosia to an Elite who had become bored and disenchanted by his own mundane existence.

They had both been through some difficult and trying times, but now Riki was his, by Riki's own choice. However, he had been thoroughly rattled at seeing Guy again, an emotion he had only experienced once before, and that had been the first time Guy had taken Riki hostage. The entire episode had left him feeling angry and uncertain.

He had tried to reach Riki on the com link as he headed home, and had been unable to do so. He wanted...needed to find Riki, to hold him. He needed to be sure that Riki was okay and that his pet did not know Guy was in Tanagura. When he checked the signal on his wrist unit and activated the homing beacon on Riki's ring, it bounced back from a shielded signal. The only place he knew where the beacon could not penetrate was Jupiter's tower, and so he had assumed that Riki was still in his session.

He returned home and prepared to wait, but that had been hours ago and the wait was slowly killing him. Unable to settle or concentrate at work, he finally opened the damn letter Guy had given him and methodically read it. It did nothing to settle his nerves, if anything it made them worse, and



despite checking Riki's tracker ever twenty minutes, he still had no idea where his lover was. The idea that Guy had managed to kidnap Riki again and was somehow blocking the signal ran rampant inside of him. He had contacted Katze and alerted security to be on the lookout for Riki, with the express order that they were only to contact him about Riki's whereabouts if they found him, and not to approach or arrest him.

He suspected that Riki knew there was a tracker in his ring, and Iason had promised himself to try and trust Riki and not use it in case of an emergency, but Guy being here most certainly constituted a danger and so it was an emergency.

A knock at his door caused Iason to turn in his chair, slide the envelope in his desk drawer and close it. "Come."

The door opened and Riki stood there. "Hey."

Thank Jupiter! Iason rose, strode to the Mongrel and wrapped his arms around him. "Riki."

Riki was startled by Iason's sudden embrace, but as he was already feeling anxious he returned it, rather than balk as he usually would.

Instead of entering Eos Tower the moment he had stepped out of the portal Raoul had pushed him through, he had turned and ran in the opposite direction, assuming that Iason would be at his office. When he was told that the Blondie had not been in at all that day Riki's heart almost stopped, especially after he remembered what Raoul had said about someone shooting at Iason.

He hurried back to the condo and the moment he entered was immediately told my Bean that The Master was waiting for him. It took him longer to walk to Iason's office than it had for him to run back to the condo, simply because he'd had to calm his turbulent emotions first. He didn't want Iason to see how anxious and worried he was, and he didn't want to worry Iason either.

"I...I went to your work, but they said you weren't in..." Riki began.

“Where have you been?” Iason demanded, pulling back just enough that he could look down at Riki. “I’ve been so worried.”

Riki blinked and felt his anxiety return. Had Iason heard about the assault? If he did then surely his newfound freedom would be revoked. Iason wouldn’t let him out of his sight if he suspected danger. Or had Raoul betrayed him and told Iason already? Had all the Blondie’s talk about protecting Iason been some sort of sick joke?

He tried again. “I...I had my session with Jupiter...”

“That should only last an hour. It’s been three hours, Riki. Where have you been?”

“I was just wandering, that’s all. I felt a little weird and I...I went to the conservatory for a bit and then...”

Iason’s hands gripped Riki’s arms protectively. “Don’t lie to me! I know you were not anywhere in Eos that could be easily located.”

Riki gaped at him, then his eyes narrowed in fury. “Were you fucking tracking me?”

“Of course! I didn’t know where you were!”

“I was fine! Why the hell...” Riki started to struggle to shrug Iason off. “I thought you trusted me! I thought...” Riki’s words were cut off as he suddenly found himself spun around and thrown forward against Iason’s desk. “Hey! Wait! Iason, don’t...” Riki grimaced as his jeans were immediately ripped down to expose his naked bottom. “Don’t you fucking...” He cried out as Iason thrust into him.

“I...I’m s...sorry!” He gasped as Iason slammed into his prostate over and over, sending shivers of intense desire shooting through him, mixing with the pain and humiliation of such a dry penetration. “I...Iason! W...wait...”

“I won’t wait. You’ve made me wait too long already.”

“I...Didn’t know you...Aaahhh! Haaa! W...would be h...home early.”

“That. Isn’t. The. Point.” Each of Iason’s words were met with another hard thrust.

Then what was the point, Riki wondered, and then his mind went blank and he could only focus on what Iason was doing to his body. He should be furious at being brutally taken like this again, after all this time, and yet he found himself pushing back against Iason with the same need the Blondie was thrusting forward into him.

He wondered when had he started to like this roughness? What sort of twisted person had Iason turned him into? Or was it because of the fear he had experienced at hearing Iason had been shot at? Were his conflicting feelings the cause of his lack of rebellion, or had he finally and totally given up on being anything other than a damn pet to Iason Mink?

That last thought brought back his anger and he started to struggle again. “Stop! Iason, God, damn it, stop it!”

When Iason suddenly stilled, Riki’s quivering body almost went into shock from the lack of stimulation. The Blondie’s arms slowly wrapped around Riki, pulling Riki’s back up against his chest, despite the fact that they were still joined below.

“I couldn’t find you.”

Iason soft murmur into Riki’s ear held just a hint of desperation, and it allowed Riki to breathe again and slowly his anger began to fade. “I’m sorry,” he returned, just as softly. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I experienced such a feeling only once before, and I was not prepared for it again, so soon.”

“I...I know.” Riki now understood what had set Iason off, and it was rather illuminating to learn that he wasn’t the only one that was still feeling the after effects of Dana Bahn.

“Tell me where you were. I apologize for using the tracker, but let there not be lies between us.”

Riki tried to think of a way to tell the truth without revealing everything. “I was in Raoul’s lab.” He felt Iason stiffen in surprise.

“Why?”

“I had a mild...incident in the market and he helped me out. To repay him I agreed to go to his lab and...help him test out this new product he was working on.”

Iason pulled out and Riki winced before he felt himself being turned to face the Blondie.

“What sort of incident?” Riki was terrified of Raoul’s lab, what could possibly have made him go there, even to repay a debt? “What product?”

“Just a...a cologne he is thinking of marketing for pets I think, and...” Riki lowered his eyes, unable to lie to Iason if he was staring into that icy blue gaze. “And just the usual bullshit, nothing major.”

Iason caught Riki’s chin and forced the Mongrel’s gaze upward. “Were you hurt?”

“Just my pride,” he promised, which was mostly true. He still couldn’t believe he hadn’t spotted the forth guy, or that the other pets had tried to help him. “I’d rather just forget about it.” He paused and wondered if he should ask about the shooting, but decided that he would wait and see if Iason told him. If he didn’t then he could use that later to counteract his own deception now.

Iason caressed Riki’s cheek, as his other hand slipped around to gently massage Riki’s ass. “I hurt you.”

“Yeah,” Riki nodded and slowly turned around. “So be gentle this time, okay?”

Iason ran his hand across Riki’s back as his over stretched out over the desk again. “I will.”

“And lose the gloves.”

Iason smiled and quickly pulled off his gloves, dropping them on the desk before slowly sliding into Riki again. “Better?”

Riki nodded and appreciated that Iason went slowly at first, allowing him to soften and adjust, but soon their mutual passion over took him. “T...There! More!”

Iason complied, until they both fell over the edge. Iason stepped back, adjusted himself and his clothing, then leaned over the desk to stare down at his gasping lover, still trembling from the waves of his orgasm. “What have we learned here today?”

“That you...you’re an impatient bastard.”

“Riki.”

Riki smirked at Iason’s tone, slowly turned and slid an arm up around Iason’s neck, pulling the Blondie down close enough that their faces almost touched. “I shouldn’t make you wait.”

“Correct.” Iason moved the extra inch required for their mouths to meet and kissed Riki thoroughly.

“Can I pull my pants up now?”

Iason chuckled and helped Riki do just that, and once his pet was properly clothed again, he dropped down into his desk chair.

“Did the session with Jupiter go well?”

“It was okay.” Riki perched on the corner of the desk. “How much longer do I have to keep going?”

“Until Jupiter decides it is no longer necessary.” Iason slid his hand across Riki’s knee and squeezed. This man was his, and no one else’s. He would not allow anyone or anything to come between them. “Have you remembered anything else about your past?”

“No.” Riki picked up a small crystal paperweight to play with. “Well, I think I started to, but it’s gone now. I don’t think it was anything significant.”

“Don’t push yourself. Everything will come back in time.”

“Hmmm. Maybe.” Riki lifted his foot and placed it between Iason’s legs on the chair. “Why weren’t you at work?”

“I had some other things to attend to.” Iason suddenly remembered Cal’s remark about the bike, and that he had neglected to get Riki a gift as yet. “I am surprised you willingly went with Raoul. I understood you disliked him.”

“I do, but you were the one that told me I should try giving him a chance and understand your kind better.

“True.” Iason calmly unlaced the boot that was between his legs and pulled it off Riki’s foot, pleased that Riki had been thinking about their discussion at Katze’s. “Still, I would prefer that you not meet with him alone, from now on.”

Riki slid his right foot off the chair and lifted his left, when Iason tapped his knee. “Why? Don’t you trust him?”

“I trust no one with you, not even Raoul.”

“Jealous much?” Riki teased as Iason removed his second boot and then gently began to massage his foot.

Iason thought about the contents of Guy’s letter and felt his anger rise. If he gave Riki the letter, would he forgive Guy? Would he ask to meet him? “I managed to come home early and you are not even here,” he said, effectively changing the subject. “It was very disappointing.”

“Yeah, well, you said I didn’t have to be at your beck and call, remember.”

“Did I? That doesn’t sound like me.” No, that didn’t sound like him at all. He wanted Riki at home when he arrived and Riki knew that. That was the

condition for Riki to be allowed to work in the market place.

“It’s your fault for coming home early then.” Riki set the paperweight down and reached for a covered file on the desk, only to have his hand smacked away. “What? Can’t I read it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it isn’t your business.”

“Who says?” Riki demanded as Iason’s eager hands found their way up his muscled calf.

“Doctrine.” Iason tugged on Riki’s leg, pulling himself closer at the same time so that his arms were resting on Riki’s thighs. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Yeah?” Riki braced his hands behind him and watched with mild interest as Iason slowly unbuttoned his jeans, yet again. “Didn’t I already get one?”

“This is a different one.”

“Such a tease.”

“You have no idea,” Iason assured as he freed Riki and pulled him into his mouth. Mine, he thought as he watched Riki’s head dip back in pleasure and slid a hand up inside Riki’s shirt to the erogenous zone around his nipple. He wanted to make up for his brutality earlier, and of course, he hadn’t yet had enough of his sweet Mongrel.

“Haa!” Riki lay back on the desk as he slid his fingers through Iason’s hair. “What... Wait...”

“No.” Iason kept his speed slow and torturous, leaving Riki gasping with need. “Had you been home when I arrived, I wouldn’t be in this state.”

Riki gasped as he felt his orgasm building again, already so fast. “Cum...”  
He gasped. “Can...I..”

“Yes.”

Riki wanted to tell Iason the truth, about the men and Raoul, but he'd made a deal. Besides, he agreed with Raoul that they needed to catch these fuckers that were after Iason. All other thoughts were blasted from his mind as he came violently inside Iason's mouth, then he lifted his arms to cover his face as he searched to find the breath that had left him.

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Cal carefully slid his knife through the homemade flour pastry he'd flattened across the cutting board, creating a decorative edge around the thick strings.

“Why do you bother?” Bean asked from his position by the sink, where he had been intently watching the former Furniture create some special pasta dish for supper, at Master Iason's request. “You can replicate the processors to shape the pasta any way you chose.”

“I find it tastes better to make the pasta from scratch,” Cal replied as he expertly slid his fingers beneath the last strings of cut pasta, dipped them in a milky mixture, then set them in the boiling water with the others.

“It is inefficient. A colossal waste of time.”

Cal rolled up the excess pastry into tiny dough-balls that he would decorate the edge of the plates with. “Perhaps.” Bean had barely said two words to him when Cal informed him that Master Iason wished for him to prepare a special meal for dinner. He'd expected some sort of displeasure from the younger Furniture, but Bean simply nodded and continued about his duties.

However, the last fifteen minutes or so, Bean had wandered back into the kitchen and stood there, staring at every move Cal had made. Cal felt unnerved by Bean's attention, he far preferred being invisible to being the



object of someone's attention, but he continued his preparation as if Bean was not there.

Cal had attempted to engage Bean in small talk a few times and Bean was obviously not interested, so Cal decided they would both steer clear of each other and just do their jobs. But now, he was in the kitchen, his kitchen really because this was the place where Cal felt the most at home. Bean had completely reorganized the kitchen in the few months he had been with Master Iason, and it took Cal some time to find what he needed.

“Do you truly believe you are needed here?”

“If it is what Master Iason wishes, then it must be so.”

“Master Iason dotes on The Pet. It is he that wants you here, not Master Iason.”

Obviously, Bean did not understand his new master yet, for Iason never did anything he didn't want, not even for Riki. “I am sure the Master's will shall be known, regardless.”

“How long did you work for him, before you left?”

“Just a little over a year,” Cal replied as he stirred the sauce he had prepared earlier.

“His last Furniture was terminated. Didn't it frighten you, knowing you were coming to work for such a person?”

Cal thought about his previous Master and knew that nothing would have been as bad as staying with him. The Platinum Elite had a vicious temper that bordered on unstable. Regardless of whether Cal did something right or wrong, he was severely punished every night.

And then, one day, Iason Mink had been visiting his Master, and they spoke of the fact that Iason needed a new Furniture. His Master had threatened to sell or terminate Cal every day, so when he made the same offer to Iason to

take his useless Furniture off his hands, he had thought nothing of it. However, Iason accepted and Cal went home with Iason that very evening.

Life in the Mink Condo was very different from life with his Platinum Master. Everything was clean and orderly, as it was with most Elites, but it did not have the same sterile feel. Master Iason had paintings and artwork in his condo. He liked house plants, soft music and fine wine, and there was not an endless supply of blood or bodies to clean up after Master Iason was finished playing with his pets; for it seemed that Master Iason had no pets.

Cal had received punishment only once, because he allowed a glass to slip from his fingers. The punishment had been severe, and it had somehow hurt Cal more than any that he had received at the hands of his old Master, because when Iason punished there was such cold detachment, and beyond the pain was the knowledge that you had disappointed him. Cal worked very hard to never do that again, and it seemed he managed quite well, even after Riki had returned.

“Master Mink is a good and fair Master.” Cal’s eyes leveled on Bean. “But he can also be a hard taskmaster, so I suggest you do nothing to incur his wrath.”

Bean shrugged. “He has not had a reason to be displeased with me, nor shall he ever have.”

“I hope you are right.”

“Unless you continue to usurp my position here.”

“I am not here for your position. I am here as a tutor for Riki. We both have duties to perform and I do not see why we cannot simply go about doing them.”

“You are too good to be Furniture now, is that it?”

Cal sighed and labelled the sauce into the bottom of a casserole dish. “That is not the case.”

“Is this something you did before?” Bean asked.

“What?”

“Cook special dinners for the Pet.”

Cal shrugged off the tingle of irritation. “I did my best to be sure both my Masters were pleased with their meals, as any Furniture should.”

“He doesn’t like my cooking.”

“Who?”

“The Pet.”

Cal crisscrossed a layer of tender, spiced strips of meat into the bottom of the dish. “Master Riki had a simple palate,” he offered kindly, remembering the many exotic dishes Cal had created that the Mongrel had balked at originally. “The food may not be to his taste, but he will still eat it.”

“He insults my cooking.”

Cal hid a smile as he turned to lift a tong-full of cooked pasta out of the pot, shook it gently and layered it over the meat. “It is his way.”

Bean moved closer as Cal covered the pasta with more sauce, then a layer of thick cheese. “Are you in love with The Pet?”

Cal’s hand froze with a strip of cheese dangling from it, as he slowly turned to look down at Bean, too shocked to manage a reply.

“If Master Iason learns you have affection for The Pet, he will be most displeased.”

Cal’s fingers tightened. “His name is Riki, you may call him, Master Riki, or Sir Riki, or just Sir, but you must stop referring to him as The Pet.”

“Why? A pet is what he is, despite his thoughts otherwise.” Bean leaned even closer, invading Cal’s space, and despite the difference in their height,

it made Cal uncomfortable. “Perhaps The Pet is in love with you? “

“N...No.” That wasn’t possible, Cal thought desperately.

“He is always defending you to Master Iason. Is that not an odd thing for a pet to do, protect their Master’s Furniture?”

“I...no, I...” Riki had a good heart, that was all. And he liked things to be stable. They had all been through so much together, so there was bound to be some affection, but certainly not...not...

“It is rumored that Master Mink’s last furniture assisted in *training* The Pet. Did you continue his training when he returned?”

Cal reacted before he could fully consider the consequence, and felt the sting of his palm only after it had made contact with Bean’s cheek. He stared down at the fallen boy who was now staring up at him, horrified.

“I...I am sorry...” He began, even as Iason and Riki entered the kitchen. Cal’s eyes widened as Bean scrambled to his feet, assumed a docile posture and hung his head.

“What is going on here?” Iason demanded. He had been bringing Riki in to show his lover what Cal was making for his surprise, and certainly had not expected to find Bean on the floor and Cal standing above him.

“Forgive me, Master,” Bean offered quietly. “I was trying to assist Mr. Cal and got in his way. He has every right to be angry with me.”

Cal gasped and felt the blood leave his body as Iason’s eyes narrowed on Cal.

“Did you strike, Bean, Cal?”

“I...I...yes.” He couldn’t lie about it, he had hit Bean. He hadn’t meant to, but the deed was done. When he lifted his eyes, just a fraction, he saw that same disappointment in Iason’s gaze and felt himself shrink. “I...I apologize, Master.”

“What was the cause?”

“As I said, Sir,” Bean stated, stepping forward. “It was entirely my fault. Please do not punish him on my account.”

Riki glared at Bean, he could almost see the boy grinning. “What did you say to him?” Riki demanded, knowing Cal wouldn’t react so harshly unless it was warranted. “You must have started it....”

“Enough,” Iason warned, holding up his hand to Riki, his eyes never leaving Cal. “Was that the way of it?”

Cal nodded. He would never, could never repeat Bean’s accusation. It was too humiliating, and if Iason saw even a kernel of truth in it, his fate would be sealed. “My actions are unforgivable, Master. Shall I fetch the whip?”

“What? No!” Riki cried and stood in front of Iason, not seeing the sly look Bean slid towards Cal, making the young boy pale. “You can’t punish him for this!”

“Riki!” Iason gripped Riki’s arms and, none too gently, pushed him aside. “There are rules that even you cannot circumvent. I cannot have my employees fighting like barbarians in my home. There must be order.” He nodded to Bean. “Bring my whip.”

Bean bowed slightly and hurried out.

“You can’t be serious!” Riki continued to protest. “Bean isn’t hurt, you heard him say it was his fault. This isn’t fair!”

The more Riki defended him the more Bean’s words penetrated and filled Cal with fear and dread, more so when Bean returned with Iason’s whip and Riki put himself between Cal and Iason.

“Move away, Riki,” Iason ordered, coldly. “I will not ask again.”

“If you’re gonna punish him then you’ll have to punish me too!”

Cal couldn't take it anymore. He quickly pulled off his tunic, stepped around Riki, turned his back to Iason and knelt on the floor. "I am ready, Master."

"No! Cal don't!"

Cal lifted his gaze to Riki, pleading for understanding and for him to stop making a scene. The depth of his plea somehow reached the mongrel, who slowly stepped back and snapped his mouth shut.

Riki noticed all the crisscrossing scars on his young Tutor's back that started from the back of his neck and dipped well into the waistband of his slacks. Riki's expression hardened as he watched Cal receive four hard strikes across his pale back, but he did notice that Iason pulled the strikes so they would not mar Cal's skin permanently. Did that mean that those marks had not been put there by Iason? Still, Iason could have waived off the punishment, he didn't need to do this.

Cal rose, slowly pulled on his shirt, turned and bowed low to Iason. "Please forgive me, Master."

"You may go to your room."

"I...would like to finish dinner, if I may?"

Iason nodded. "As you like."

Cal nodded and returned to the stove, as if nothing had happened.

Riki, who was vibrating with anger now stormed out of the room, and Iason knew his pet was very angry with him. "Bean," Iason said and waived his hand toward the place where Cal had knelt a moment before. He noticed the slight, startled pause in the Furniture's eye, before Bean mimicked Cal's routine and sat with his back to Iason.

Cal flinched slightly each time the whip struck Bean, but he continued to prepare his special dish, and slipped the finished product into the oven to bake.

Bean rose, trembling, and pulled on his shirt, then accepted the whip from Iason to put away.

“Bean can finish it,” Iason stated quietly, as he watched Cal adjust the temperature and time for cooking.

“Yes.” Cal rinsed his hands and wiped them on a towel, he knew when he was being dismissed. “It will be ready in thirty minutes and should be served with toasted bread.”

“I will take care of it,” Bean said quietly upon his return, far more subdued now than he had been before.

“Thank you, Bean.” Cal turned, again bowed to Iason, then moved to the back stairs of the kitchen and climbed to his room.

“I am unsure if they explained things to you at the agency, Bean,” Iason began as he watched the Furniture prepare the bread for Cal’s special meal. He knew that Riki would now not want to eat, and the fact that the occasion was ruined angered him further. “I insist on peace and order in my home.”

“Yes, Sir. I apologize for this instance. I had no idea that Mr. Cal would be so disagreeable to my assista....” Bean’s eyes widened as Iason grabbed him by the shirt and lifted him almost off his feet.

“Do you think me a fool?” he asked, coldly and had the great satisfaction of watching the boy tremble. “I don’t care if you want to kill each other or fuck each other; you will keep such contentions to yourselves and work together properly while in my home, or I will sell you both to the worst brothel I can find. Am I understood, Bean?”

“Y...yes, Master.”

“Good.”

Iason released him so suddenly that Bean almost fell backwards. “Take the dish out in twenty-four minutes and serve it in the dining room with a red wine for myself and a paru juice for Riki.”

Iason spun on his heel and stormed out, furious that they had put him in such a position, especially in front of Riki. His pet would be very upset with him now, but it had to be done. Cal and Bean understood that, why couldn't Riki?

After checking the living area, library and balcony, he finally found Riki in their bathroom rooting through the cabinets.

"Riki," he began, pausing in the doorway as the mongrel grabbed a jar out of the drawer and slowly rose to his feet. "It had to be done."

Riki turned, but refused to meet Iason's gaze. "I'm gonna go put some salve on Cal's back." He bit hard enough on his lower lip that it started to bleed. "May, I?"

Iason heard the sarcasm, fury and hurt in that simple question and tried to rein in his own temper. "I am sure he would appreciate that." He stepped back, away from the doorway to allow Riki through. He would need to go slow to calm his lover's ire, it would seem.

Riki stalked through the doorway and across their bedroom, then, paused at the open door. "Did you... Those marks on his back. Were they from you?"

"No. His former Master is responsible."

Still Riki hesitated, looking at the salve in his hand rather than at Iason. "How... Did you buy Cal from him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He was getting rid of him and I happened to be looking for a Furniture."

Riki's grip on the jar tightened, angrily. "Does it make you feel important buying and selling people like goods at a market?"

"I don't feel anything about it, one way or the other, however, Cal was a special case."



Finally, Riki lifted his gaze. “Why?”

“He was a good Furniture, and he probably would have been dead within the month, had I not purchased him.”

“So...you did it out of sympathy, then?”

“No. I did it to gain a good and loyal Furniture.”

“And yet you beat him just like his former Master.”

Iason sat down on their bed and raised his hand. “Come here, Riki,”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I’m mad at you.”

“I am aware, but come anyway. I wish to tell you something important, and I prefer not to shout it across the room.”

After another moment’s hesitation, Riki released the door handle and moved to stand in front of Iason. He allowed Iason to take his hand and gently tug him onto the bed so they were seated side by side.

“What do you want to tell me?” Riki demanded, still angry at what Iason had done.

“I know that you see me as a cold, ruthless person at times, but I am not always. I always have a reason for doing what I do. I had a reason for taking you as a pet. I had a reason for making Katze my right hand in the Black Market and I had a reason for employing Cal.”

“What are the reasons?” Riki felt a hint of excitement and trepidation. Would he finally learn why Iason had chosen him? Finally, after all this time, would he get a valid and honest answer from the Blondie.

“My reason for Cal are the only ones that require discussion.”

“I want to know all of them.”

“Why?”

Riki shrugged and played with the label on the jar rather than look at Iason. “Don’t I deserve to know?” He wanted more information on what made Iason tick. He wanted to know more about Iason, but the Blondie was rarely forthcoming about such things.

“Very well,” Iason agreed and slid his arm around Riki’s shoulder, felt his lover stiffen. “I will tell you, but only if you will forgive me and no longer be angry.”

Riki shrugged him off. “Like that’s gonna happen.”

“Then I suppose there is nothing further to discuss.” Iason started to rise, but Riki’s tentative hand at the back of his tunic stopped him. “Am I forgiven, then?”

“No.” Riki stared at the floor as the sting of embarrassment slapped against his cheeks. “Just...Cal, then. I can’t understand why you did that to Cal after everything we’ve been through.”

Iason settled back and put his arm around Riki again, relieved when the Mongrel allowed it. “Tenian was someone I had many dealings with,” he began. “He has a sharp mind for business and a vast network of connections that I could easily utilize. Because of this, I turned a blind eye to his personal vices.”

Riki lifted his gaze and near black eyes met ice blue. “How bad was he?”

“He is afflicted with certain, undesirable traits, however they did not affect his business acumen or social standing and so they were ignored.”

“Until?”

“Well, I imagine he is still doing what he is doing behind closed doors, and as I have broken many rules myself with you, I can hardly be one to condemn him for it now.”

“But you did before?”

“Condemn him, no, not openly, however there was apparent evidence of how badly he was treating his pets and his Furniture. Cal must have been being treated badly, but the boy was always a perfect Furniture whenever I was there; as he was for anyone who visited Tenian. The boy was prompt, polite, skilled, and excelled at guessing his Master’s needs. Tenian had no idea of the jewel he owned because he was so buried in his own filth.”

“So, you bought Cal, to get him away from this other Blondie?”

“Tenian is a Platinum, not a Blondie, but yes I took advantage of one of Tenain’s rants of selling off the boy to make Cal my property. Tenian tried to ask demand Cal back after only a few days, but the deal had been struck and so I would not relinquish him.”

“Then...you saved him?”

Iason caressed Riki’s hair. “I wish there to be no misunderstandings between us, Riki,” he said softly. “The feelings I have for you, do not extend to others. I felt Tenain’s behavior was crude and distasteful, I wanted to crush that part of him. I did recognize Cal as an excellent Furniture and considered his future possibilities, however I did not purchase him for that reason.”

Riki absorbed Iason’s words, then it finally hit him. “You just did it to fuck Tenain over then? You took away his favorite dog so he no longer had anyone to beat up on.”

“A crude analogy, but I suppose you could say that.”

“So, do you even like Cal?”

“Of course! I am very fond of him. He has been incredibly loyal and helpful to us.”

Riki stared at the salve in his hands as another question formed in his mind, and with that a question that he hadn’t anticipated suddenly caused a lump

to form in his throat.

“Riki?” Iason asked as he watched his lover’s expression change.

“Did you...did you bring him back, for me?”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation in Iason’s voice, no smugness or apology, just honesty.

“Why?”

“Because you wanted him here. Because he makes you feel more secure when we are here, and gives you a peace I cannot manage alone.”

Riki felt like his heart was going to tear through his chest. “I...I don’t understand.” Why would Iason do that? Why would he bring Cal back just because Riki wanted it? Riki wanted many things, Freedom most of all, but Iason refused to give him that. So why this? Why did he care whether he was comfortable in Tanagura or not?

Iason caressed Riki’s cheek. “I will give you all that I am capable of giving, Riki. I have told you this.”

Yes. Yes, Iason had said that before but Riki had never really understood it before, or perhaps refused to believe it. That little mongrel part of him that he had tried to bury down so deep inside started to surface again. “But, you can’t give me everything I want.” It wasn’t an accusation, or a statement, he was just thinking aloud.

“No. There are some things I cannot give you. But those are things I am working on.”

“Like what?”

“Like I promised. Getting us out of and away from Tanagura. Allowing you more freedom, without it endangering your life, of course.”

Riki lifted his eyes to Iason. “Do you think I’ll run? If you give me all the freedom I want, do you think I’ll leave you?”

Iason stared hard into Riki’s eyes and tried to ignore the tightening in his chest. “I warned you at the beach house that once you made the choice there was no going back, Riki.”

“That isn’t what I asked, Iason.”

Iason, feeling suddenly exposed, pulled Riki into his arms. “I have no answer. I hope you would chose to stay, but...I am uncertain, because I understand how much such a thing means to you and how much you detest it here.”

Because Riki didn’t know the answer either, he dropped the salve on the bed and slid his arms around Iason. “Would you chase me if I ran?”

“Yes.”

Riki felt an odd sort of relief at how quickly Iason answered. “Okay.”

They sat there, holding each other for some time, before Riki finally pulled back. “I...I’m gonna go see Cal.”

Iason caught Riki’s hand as he rose. “Are you still angry with me?”

“Yeah. I still think you were wrong to do it, but I guess I can’t really stop you.”

“I regret making you angry, Riki.”

“I think Cal is probably feeling more regretful than you are.”

“Perhaps.” Iason watched Riki leave and sighed. Why did things have to be so complicated?

**Notes for the Chapter:**

So, the next chapter can be a few things. I have several written, (Just need to edit and tweek) and they can be uploaded pretty much in any order, during this time because it will all take place during the festival. However I will not be able to upload until after Thanksgiving, so I hope you will be patient.

Your choices are -

1. Guy and Shiao have their own celebration/Riki and Iason exchange gifts for the Festival
2. Jupiter makes some decisions concerning Riki and her Elites, A little more background on Carrie
3. Katze and Raoul spend some time together and Cal learns more about Riki's origin
4. A small insight into the people after Riki and Iason (so none of the main characters will be in this chapter very much)

They will all be uploaded eventually, but I am interested in which one you would like first, so please let me know. :-)

## Chapter 15

### Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Riki kick off the festival together

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all SO SO much for hanging in there and understanding my delay in posting. I had a lot of projects piled up that had to get done and as much as I love to write about our favorite pair, it was getting in the way of everything else. So thank you for sticking with me.

I had actually intended to upload these next few bits separately, along with an alternate scene from another character, but because you hung on so long, I decided to combine them and make a nice long read for you. The other chapters will not be this long.

So, read on, and as always, please let me know what you think.

“Hey,” Riki greeted with a mild wave as Iason entered their condo, and then turned back to his book. He had been studying with Cal all week and got full marks on his tests. His reward had been a fascinating murder mystery, which he just couldn’t put down.

“Is that really how you intend to greet me?” Iason asked, pleased to find Riki stretched out on the sofa facing the door, with a large leather bound book in his hand, rather than on the balcony smoking; his usual spot.

“Huh? Yeah.” Riki spared Iason a minimal glance then was back in his book. “Just a sec.”

Iason handed his cloak to Bean and pressed his lips together to keep from laughing at his lover’s look of deliberate concentration, Iason stepped down into the living area and crossed to stand by the sofa.

“Riki.”

Without looking up from his book, Riki tossed his legs over the side, rose, and stood almost on his toes as Iason bent his head. He distractedly touched his lips to the Blondie's for the barest second, before he started to sit down again.

"No, I don't think so." Iason pulled the book away from Riki, keeping his fingers in the opening as he held it up and out of his pet's reach. "I want a proper kiss."

"Come on! It's at a crucial part!"

"I'm home, Riki."

"God, you're such a child!" Riki lifted his face a second time and Iason lowered his own until their mouths met. Despite his irritation, Riki found himself responding to Iason's kiss, as he always did lately.

Not until he had a satisfactory taste of Riki, and knew the younger man was losing the ability to breathe, did Iason end the kiss. "Better." He slowly lowered the book so that Riki could snatch at it. "Be nice."

Riki grumbled and flopped down on the sofa again, curling his legs up when Iason sat on the sofa beside him.

"Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes," Bean announced, knowing that his master preferred to spend at least that much time with Riki when first arriving home.

"That will do."

Bean disappeared towards the kitchen as Iason pulled Riki's legs across his lap. "How was your day?"

"Fine."

Perturbed at the one word answer and the fact that Riki was not paying any attention to him, Iason pulled a sock off Riki's foot causing the mongrel to kick out.



“I’m trying to read!”

“So read.” Iason tossed one sock onto the cushion beside him, then the other.

He liked Riki’s feet, they were small for a man, but like the rest of Riki’s body were still lean and attractive. He’d hadn’t spent much effort on examining them in the past, as he had the rest of Riki’s body, so it seemed a good time to catch up.

He ran a finger up the inside of Riki’s arch, startled when Riki yelped.

“Does that hurt?” he asked, curious to find such a vulnerability.

“*Don’t* do that.”

“Why not?”

“Just...don’t.”

The devil in Iason smiled widely, perhaps it wasn’t pain Riki was feeling. Perhaps he found another erogenous zone. He caressed Riki’s arch again and his lover almost came off the sofa.

“Stop!”

“Tell me what this does to you.”

Riki tossed his book down and sat up, trying to pry his foot out of Iason’s grasp. “Just leggo!” When Iason simply repeated his action a bubble of laughter surged out of Riki before he could catch it. “God! Stop!”

Iason grinned, delighted. “This makes you laugh?” He yanked Riki almost across his lap and caressed his foot again and again and again until Riki was nearly breathless, both from laughter and from struggling. “How intriguing!”

“It...Tickles! Stop! Please!”

Iason pressed his hand to Riki's chest, enjoying the rapid heartbeat he felt beneath the flesh, as well as the quick panting breaths that expelled from Riki's mouth. It was similar to when he was aroused, yet different. And what a lovely sound Riki's laughter was, so high pitched and freeing.

"How charming. Why didn't you tell me of this secret?"

"I hate to be tickled!" Riki spat, struggling against Iason's arms now. "Fucker! Leggo!"

"Apologize for ignoring me earlier."

"I'm sorry you're a spoiled infant, now..." Again Riki tried to break free, but Iason simply maneuvered him across his lap and slapped his ass. "Ow! Come on!"

"Apologize, properly."

"No!" Riki flinched as another hard slap landed across his butt and then grimaced as he felt himself harden. How could he even remotely enjoy such humiliation? Iason had turned him into a freak. "Fuck you." A harder slap this time, Riki closed his eyes and shuddered. "I...I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," Iason's hand began to massage the flesh he had injured, enjoying the feel of Riki's erection pressing against his lap. "You enjoyed that."

"N...no." He would never admit it, not even if they threatened to erase his brain would he ever admit that.

Iason's touch was becoming more insistent now, as he slipped a gloved hand inside the waistband of Riki's jeans.

"O...Off," Riki demanded. "Take...take 'em off." He didn't like being molested with Iason's gloves, he wanted to feel Iason's hands. Iason complied and a moment later flesh met flesh. "Aaahh." He arched as Iason probed his hole with one finger, then two. "Wait..."

"Wait for what?"

“I don’t...know.” Riki hated himself for pushing back against Iason’s hand, but it just felt so damn good! He was practically grinding his dick into Iason’s leg now, craving more stimulation.

“Tell me what you want, Riki.”

Iason’s soft, whispered voice in his ear almost made Riki come right then. He didn’t have an answer, even after all this time, his pride would not allow for it, so instead he pushed up, startling the Blondie, and suddenly knelt on the floor between Iason’s legs.

“Riki?” Iason began and then wet his lips as Riki released his hardening organ and wrapped hot, moist lips around it. “Ahh...I see.”

Riki wanted to tell Iason to shut up, he hated when the Blondie sounded smug, but he wanted to be fucked and he would prefer that it not be dry; dry always hurt. He licked Iason’s shaft from base to tip, marveling at the length of it because he rarely saw it up close. Usually Iason was doing this to him, or it was up his ass, so there was little chance for an in-depth study.

Sliding his mouth over the tip again, he slowly inserted as much as he could manage without gagging, and sucked, hard. Iason’s hand in his hair was a sign he was doing a good job. He licked his way up and around it again, then took Iason back into his mouth. Suck. Lick. Suck. Lick. Suddenly he increased his speed, lapping and sucking as if his life depended on it.

He wasn’t surprised when he was suddenly yanked upwards, or that Iason had his jeans off before he could even think of doing so. Pulling him forward, Riki let Iason guide him as he straddled the Blondie’s lap and gasped as Iason plunged inside of him. Over and over again they thrust and rutted, Riki coming on his own, before Iason brought him back up to that incredible height for a second time and plunged over with him.

“Now, that is the proper way to welcome me home,” Iason decided as he caressed Riki’s hair.

Riki grunted, slid sideways onto the sofa and reached to the floor. “Great, now where’s my book.”

Iason immediately grabbed Riki's foot and watched the book quickly fall from his hands, back to the floor.

"No!"

Iason relented and settled for caressing Riki's calf. "I like to hear you laugh, Riki. Are still so unhappy here that I must carry out a physical assault to get you to do so?"

Riki stared at Iason, then slowly stood and pulled on his jeans. "It's not that," he said after several moments and remembered that he had made a promise to try and be more honest. He picked up his shirt, but only stared at it instead of putting it on. "It's not only that."

Iason adjusted his clothing and crossed one leg over the other. "What then?"

Riki shrugged. "I didn't laugh a whole lot before. I've never really had that much to laugh about, y'know?."

"And now?"

Riki grew quiet again as he shrugged into his shirt. Now he had even less. "I need a smoke."

"I'll come with you," Iason decided as he watched Riki stop to grab the pack out of his jacket pocket before stepping onto the balcony.

Riki pulled out one cigarette, paused then pulled out a second. "Want one?"

"Could do," Iason agreed, in the same way he had when they had shared a Black Moon cigarette at Dana Bahn.

He still loathed the damn things, his cigars had a much more pleasant taste, but it was so rare that Riki offered to share in his personal indulgence how could he say no? He would share a smoke with Riki every day if his lover asked him too, because it made him feel that much closer to the Mongrel. Smoking, for Riki, was very intimate and very personal and Iason understood that.

Riki lit Iason's, then his own with his lighter, unable to allow too many similarities to the last time. "Do you ever think about it?" he asked quietly.

"Not often," Iason admitted as he inhaled tobacco. He knew that Riki was referring to their near death experience. "I don't see the point. It is past, and we survived. What more is there to think about?"

"Yeah." Riki flicked his ash over the side of the balcony. "Good philosophy."

"You think of it too much, Riki."

He sighed. "I know, but it rattles around in my brain and I can't seem to stop it."

Iason was all too aware of that fact. Between them almost dying at Dana Bhan and now this revelation about Riki's parents, his mongrel suffered nightmares a few times a month still.

"Do you wish we had died?"

Riki shook his head. No, he didn't wish that, but he had been ready to die. Maybe things would be easier if they had and then he wouldn't be having to deal with all this pet crap and crazy mixed emotions.

"Was there anything you could have changed to make the outcome different?"

"I don't know." Riki shrugged. This was the first time that they had really talked about what happened. Riki wasn't used to sharing how he felt, and he had been wary to bring up Guy's name in front of Iason. "I mean, there are a hundred things I could have done differently, but..."

"But you cannot be sure that Guy would not have done the same thing."

And that was the problem. The fact that Riki had not realized Guy had been so close to the edge. The fact that he didn't know Guy was capable of wanting to hurt him or kill someone. It haunted him, the idea that his friend was someone he didn't know everything about.

“Are you looking for resolution or absolution, Riki?”

“I don’t know. Neither, both.” Riki propped his cigarette between his lips and hoisted himself up onto the thick concrete rail so he was facing Iason. “We drove him to do what he did. I drove him to it and I should have handled it better. I shouldn’t have been...”

Iason tossed his half-finished cigarette over the side and stepped between Riki’s legs to wrap his arms around securely around the younger man’s waist, mostly because he was worried his pretty lover would fall over the side. “Do you blame me for making you choose?”

Riki lowered his eyes and stared at his cigarette. “Not so much anymore.”

So blame had been assigned, Iason thought and tried not to sigh. He was willing to accept Riki’s anger and resentment for the choices he had made in the past, but he had wanted to believe they were both beyond such things. “Then how can you blame yourself?”

“I don’t know! I...I just do. I know you don’t like me thinking about Guy, but he was a huge part of my life for so many years. I can’t just forget him and I hate that we pushed him into that kind of thing. I hate that I’ll never know why he did it, or that I’ll ever really have the chance to tell him how...how fucking angry I still am at him for ruining...”

Riki took a deep breath and realized he had said too much. He had never talked like this to Iason. The subject of Guy was always taboo because of Iason’s unreasonable jealousy. Perhaps also because talking about Guy hurt and brought back memories Riki was trying to forget, both good ones and bad.

Rather than scold him, Iason pulled Riki closer and embraced him. He thought about the letter locked in his desk and a spark of jealousy and anger speared through him. It would be better if Guy had died of his wounds back at Dana Bhan. It would have been better if he had just followed up on his threat and turned Guy into a mindless sex doll.

Yet, he realized that even if all of that happened, Riki would still be suffering, perhaps more so because he would never find an answer to his questions.

Riki realized that he'd let his cigarette burn up without taking more than a couple of puffs, pulled back from Iason and tossed it over the side in disgust. "I don't want to talk about Guy."

"Nor do I," Iason confirmed, keeping his arms linked around his lover's waist. "But I wish for you to feel comfortable enough to do so, Riki. Is that not what a partner does? Allows for his lover to talk of things that bother him?" At least, the literature he had read on the subject of Human couples implied such things.

"I...I guess."

"Did you not do these things with Guy?" Iason tensed without realizing it, waiting for Riki's answer. He didn't want to think of Riki sharing such intimate words and feelings with anyone else, it was an irrational thought, yet most of his thoughts and feelings were, when it came to Riki.

"Yeah, some anyway. Not a lot."

Riki had never admitted how badly he wanted out of the slums, except for that day he had returned to Guy's flat after being thoroughly molested and humiliated by Iason. He had scored a couple of bottles of really good whiskey, one of which he had polished off before returning to the flat. In a drunken stupor he had rambled on about how if he stayed where he was, as he was, he was going to die.

Guy, of course, had no idea what had caused the extreme mood. Had no idea that just hours before Riki had offered himself to a Blondie who had changed his world. Even now, he wasn't sure if it was anger at how Iason had treated him, lust over what the Blondie had done, or guilt that he had beyond enjoyed it beyond anything he and Guy had ever done.

He had never admitted that he never felt at home in Ceres, or that he had always felt apart from everyone else. There were no discussions on what

either of them wanted in the future, because when you lived in Ceres your future was bleak. Survival was all you had, day to day, week to week and even when he went to work for Katze, he didn't bother to tell Guy- he didn't bother to share. Perhaps if he had, Guy would have had somewhere to start looking for him when Iason had captured him; the first time, not that it would have done him much good.

What if he had been honest with Guy, when he returned to Ceres three years later, instead of keeping his distance? Could they have made a plan to run away somewhere, to get away from Iason Mink and all the Blondies? But, no, he had been free, or thought he was, so why would he need to run?

"Dinner is served, Sir," Bean said from the doorway of the balcony, startling Riki out of his reverie.

Riki looked up at Iason, completely forgetting that he wasn't alone, and found those ice blue eyes studying him. "Hey."

"Hey." Iason caressed his cheek, tenderly. "I love you, Riki." He had watched a thousand different emotions run across Riki's tormented features and wished, for the first time, that he had Jupiter's ability to mind link with another. He was surprised and slightly alarmed when Riki's gloriously dark eyes grew moist.

"I know," Riki said and lowered his head shyly, only to have Iason kissed the top. He did know that Iason loved him, and he was slowly growing to accept it, even if he still didn't understand why.

"We'll be right there," Iason told Bean as he stepped back and waited for Riki to drop down. He slid his arm around Riki's waist as they stepped in from the balcony and walked through the living area towards the dining room. "Have you thought about what you would like to do for the festival?"

"Will you be working?"

"Just in the morning, and there are several events that we have been invited to."



“We?” Riki sneered as they entered the dining room where Bean had their meals waiting on the table for them.

Bean appeared to hold Iason’s chair at the head of the table, as Riki settled at his right. “I suggest the Ice Marinn 22 for today’s meal, Sir,” he said as he held up the bottle of wine for Iason to inspect. “I believe it will bring out the best flavour in the meat.”

Iason nodded and watched Bean pour the liquid into his glass. “Do you wish to try it, Riki? It will be sweeter than other wines.”

“Okay.” Riki’s eyes narrowed on Bean as the boy hesitated for just a fraction of a second, before moving to Riki’s side and pouring him a glass. “Where’s Cal?”

“He said he was feeling unwell and went to lie down.”

“Does he have a headache or something?”

“I did not inquire. He merely requested to be released from dinner.”

Riki scowled as Bean removed the gold domes from their plates to reveal a meat and vegetable dish over some kind of greens. With a sigh, he picked up his fork.

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Riki squared his shoulders and tried not to cringe at the attention they garnered as they walked through Tanagura’s market place. The festival was in full swing, which included music pipping through the loud speakers, a gaggle of vendors excitedly calling out their wares, scantily clad dancers and performers on the street corners and of course a hoard of Elites and Humans alike wandering around.

He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and rolled his eyes as they were forced to stop, yet again, as two other Elites offered their greetings to Iason. Granted, Iason rarely wandered the marketplace or lower levels of the city, he was usually far too busy or he would send someone else to do his bidding, but it was starting to grate on his nerves.

This was supposed to be their time together. Iason had been leaving early and working late almost every night for the longest while. They hadn't even had sex in several days, except for the night Iason took him on the sofa. Riki was either sleeping when Iason left, or sleeping when he came back and Iason was not bothering to wake him up, as he usually would.

They hadn't even managed to have dinner together lately. Had Iason gotten tired of him? He was no longer the fifteen-year-old boy that Iason had captured to play with and tease. Was he finally too old for Iason's touch, or was it that he had gotten so used to Iason's possessiveness, to the Blondie always being around that when he wasn't...when he wasn't... Could Riki actually be missing Iason?

True, he had found himself looking forward to the festival more than he had expected to. He'd been pestering Cal with questions about the traditions and what could be expected and he had learned them all, well most of them anyway. He was nervous about the last day of the festival, there would be a lot of pomp and circumstance before the Elites were secluded with Jupiter, and Iason had been too busy the first day to do anything. This was really the only day they had for him to be free with Iason. A jolt ran through him. Free...with Iason. When the hell had he started thinking like that?

He lifted his gaze and noticed that two Rubies had replaced the two Blondies that originally interrupted them. Fear at his sudden revelation quickly turned to anger. Free. Who the hell was he kidding? He would never be free, not so long as he was with Jupiter's favored son. Not so long as everyone who wanted something kept cozying up to Iason like a fucking pet in heat!

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he started to move away, intending to leave Iason on his own, since he was so much in fucking demand.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Iason said, his hand snaking out in a flash and catching Riki’s arm.

“Away from your groupies,” he hissed and tried to shake Iason off, even as the Rubies wandered off.

“Are you jealous?”

“No!”

“Then what has upset you?”

“Nothing! Will you let go!”

Amused, Iason pulled Riki even closer. “No. I will not.”

Knowing he couldn’t break Iason’s hold, Riki stopped struggling. “Everyone’s looking.”

“Let them look.”

Riki tried to shut out at the stares. “You’d think you were a King or something,” he muttered.

Iason’s other hand snaked around Riki’s waist and whispered. “Then wouldn’t that make you my Queen?”

Riki’s lips twitched. “Sick bastard.” He shoved away and broke free, but only because Iason allowed him to.

Iason chuckled and slipped his hand into Riki’s. “Come, you agreed to let me buy you something.”

“You just bought me lunch.”

“Something other than food.”

“I could use more smokes I guess.”

“Not those either.” They paused at a shop window of a clothing boutique.  
“Perhaps a new jacket?”

“Why?” Riki ran his hand down the soft leather of his usual jacket, the only thing he took with him from his old life. “This one has plenty of wear left.”

“But it’s old and starting to fade.”

“Yeah, but it has sentimental value.” Riki wasn’t surprised to find himself standing on his toes as Iason’s blue eyes flashed red and the fingers now curled around the front of his shirt tightened.

“Explain yourself.”

Riki wet his lips and decided to get back at Iason for his recent lack of attention. “The guy I got it from was smokin’ hot.”

“Take it off!”

“It was a fair deal!” Riki retorted, still dangerously playing with fire, even when Iason continued to glower at him. “I traded a favor for it.”

“What sort of favor?” Iason was all too aware of how Riki repaid favors.  
“What did you trade?”

“Why? You jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now get your paws off me, you’re making a scene, oh Great Favored Son.”

It took Iason several seconds to realize that Riki was playing with him, mocking him. He slowly released the mongrel and set him back on his feet.  
“That was very dangerous, Riki. Do not do that again.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like it.”

“Yeah?” Riki grew sullen. “Well, do you think I like everyone swarming all over you like flies on shit all the time?”

“They are merely offering their respects, Riki. They mean nothing to me.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Then what is the point?”

“I...” He couldn’t say it. Riki couldn’t voice his frustration about wanting to have Iason all to himself today; his pride simply wouldn’t allow it.”  
“Nothing. There is no point.” He turned and shoved his hands in his pockets again. “Are we gonna shop or not?”

Iason fell in step beside Riki again as they moved out of the alcove and through the tented area of the marketplace. They looked over several stalls, some had strange wares, others glittering and expensive ones. There were a few that boasted off world treasures, and others that claimed natural and exotic cures for every ailment.

Riki enjoyed looking through the wares, but nothing had really caught his interest, until the scent of something delicious wafted towards them. “What *is* that?”

“What?” Iason asked, curious.

“That smell.” Riki looked around but couldn’t see where it was coming from. “It smells really good.”

Iason, being over a head taller than almost everyone else, spotted a small food booth. “I believe what you are looking for is this way,” he said as he took Riki’s arm and guided him through the crowd.

There was a small line up around the booth, and being even closer to the mouth-watering scent had Riki’s stomach growling. Spotting an Elite behind them, the people crowding the booth quickly parted and allowed them through.

Okay, so maybe having the Top Blondie with him wasn't bad all of the time, Riki thought as he looked over the a strange looking grill holding some sort of sticks with an array of different things on them.

"That smells amazing," Riki said as the heavy-set vendor added several more sticks to the grill.

"You've got a good nose, kid," the man said as he turned, then just suddenly stopped and stared.

"It does smell intriguing," Iason agreed, looking over the food. "What is it called?"

"S...shish-kabob," the man said, but his eyes never left Riki. "It...it's an old Earth dish." As if physically pulling himself from his daze, he reached over and lifted one of the cooked sticks by the end that was not over the grill, and offered it to Riki. "Try it, you'll like it."

Riki accepted the stick, but before he could get a bite, Iason and pulled it away from him and lifted it to his nose, to analyze all of the properties. "Hey!"

The vendor finally seemed to notice Iason. "It's just meat and vegetables."

Nodding, Iason gave Riki back the treat, but he didn't like the way the vendor was staring at his pet.

"Gee, thanks," Riki retorted, wryly, and bit into the first chunk of meat. "Wow! Oh wow! Iason, try it!"

Iason leaned down and took a bite as Riki held the stick up for him. "It is good."

"Good, it's fucking amazing!" Riki took another bite, eagerly, mildly surprised when the vendor quickly offered him another.

"Have as many as you like."

“Thank you, but two will be enough.” Iason pulled out his credit stick but the vendor waved his hand.

“No, no charge. Enjoy them. Spread the word, it will bring me more business.”

Riki polished off the first stick and snorted. “Yeah, nobody cares what I think, you might want to get someone else to advertise, mister.”

“I care very much what you think.”

Both Riki and Iason blinked at the man, who turned beet red, then moved back to his grill. “Just tell whoever, I’m sure it will be fine. Who’s next?”

Iason scowled as they walked away and Riki started nibbling on the second stick.

“Did you want any of this?” Riki asked, when he was already half way done.

Iason smiled, glad at least that Riki was enjoying them so much. “No, you finish it off.”

“Okay.”

“I am just going to make a call, all right?”

“Bud-ness?” Riki demanded, his mouth full. “Nub?”

“Not business, no. It will be a quick call.” Iason leaned down and licked the juice from Riki’s chin, heard Riki’s breath hitch. “Why don’t you get a drink to wash that down?” He pointed to one of the mechanical droids that were trolling the marketplace with an unlimited supply of beverages. “Get me one as well.”

“Otay.” Riki moved forward and signaled the droid, who turned, dipped and then rose over the crowd to reach him. He selected two bottles as he polished off the second Shish-kabob, then slid both sticks into the small recycler in the side of the droid.

He leaned against the wall of a closed stall and watched Iason make his call, then opened his drink and downed half of it. Damn, that was good food. He could probably eat another one. There was something really familiar about the taste, but he couldn't place it. Maybe he'd ask Cal to go through his cookbooks and see if there was anything similar; he'd probably had it before and just forgot.

Once Iason finished his call, they resumed their path through the marketplace. Several people still tried to stop them, but one look from Iason's ice blue eyes and they merely nodded and moved on, understanding that the Blondie wished to be alone with his pet.

"I still have to buy you something, Riki."

"You just did."

"We agreed to something other than food."

Riki rolled his eyes, he had never agreed to that. "Then let's go to Carrie's stall. She has nice things and if you're gonna spend money it should go to someone like her."

"You like her quite a lot, don't you?"

"Yeah she..." Riki paused and looked up at Iason, warily, saw the green-eyed monster staring back. "Oh for the love of...She's old enough to be my mother twice over!"

Iason chuckled, and wondered how Carrie would feel about such a description, she was probably only in her thirties, by Human standards. "Is she? I suggest you not tell her that."

Riki shrugged and started walking again. "You can't get jealous over everyone I talk to, Iason."

"I'm not jealous."

"Bullshi..." Riki's words drifted away as they neared the air-cycle shop. The bike with the flames was still in the window, but there was a SOLD



sign on it. He rubbed at his chest, wondering why it suddenly hurt.

“Riki?”

“Huh?” Riki looked up at Iason, then back at the bike that reminded him of Guy. He should walk away, he needed to walk away before he had to explain himself to Iason and they ended up in an argument, and yet he couldn’t seem to force his feet move.

“Have you ever driven one of these?”

“Yeah.” It seemed ages ago since he’d been running the streets with Guy, holding onto Guy’s back as they sped through the city, or revving the cycle to the limit on the rides he took alone.

“I think I would like to see that.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t.” Riki finally managed to turn away and start walking.

That was in his past, a past he was trying to forget. Besides, where could he ride it in the pristine and crowded streets of Tanagura? Having a bike like that and not being able to open it up would be a waste. He hadn’t even realized that he had gotten several feet ahead of Iason until he was suddenly enveloped in the arms of a squealing, jumping woman.

“Riki! Riki! Riki!” Carrie cried forcing Riki to jump around with her, only because he was too stunned to stop her. “You are a GOD! A God, I tell you!”

“Stop!” Riki tried to say, even as he watched Iason stroll up to them, his expression dark. “Shit! Let go!”

Carrie glanced behind her towards the Blondie. “Oh, hi.” She paused, held Riki at arms-length. “Permission to hug the living shit out of this guy?”

Amused, more by Riki’s horrified expression than her unusual greeting. “I believe you already have.”

“Yeah, but I never got a hug back because I scared him.”

Iason didn't like sharing his things, especially Riki, but he rather liked this woman, and after Riki's earlier comment, he realized that Carrie was not a threat. “Very well.”

“What! Iason!” Riki began, appalled to find himself enthusiastically embraced a second time. “Get. Off. Me! You crazy woman!”

“Not till you hug *me* back. Hug me *back*. Hugmeback!”

Desperate to be released Riki slid his arms around her and hugged her hard enough to lift her off her feet, making her squeal and laugh. A pulse of pleasure ricocheted through him as he set her back down and immediately released her.

“Freak!” he accused and could feel the heat in her cheeks.

“Absolutely!” She clapped her hands and laughed, before turning to Iason. “Thank you for that. I was just so excited I couldn't contain myself.” She paused. “You are okay with it, right? I'm not going to wake up dead tomorrow with my limbs in different sections of the city, am I?”

Yes, Iason liked her very much indeed and Riki's reaction to her wildness was priceless. “Dismemberment can be a costly affair. It would be much cheaper to have you sold to an off world trader.” The moment the words were out Iason regretted then, worried that they would upset Riki because of his childhood experience, but he was genuinely pleased when Riki grinned.

“Good luck with that,” he scoffed as he wandered over to her stall. “If she starts to bargain with you, your toast.”

“I believe that is the nicest complement that you have ever paid me,” Carrie said as she hopped over her counter and returned to the inner section of her stall. “Oh, wait. That's the only compliment you've ever paid me.”

“Maybe one day you’ll earn another one,” Riki retorted as he picked up a silver bracelet from one of the display cases.

Carrie snorted and leaned closer to him. “You like that? Three hundred credits.”

This time it was Riki’s turn to snort as he tossed the bracelet at her and lifted the cuff of his jacket. “It’s not as pretty as mine.”

She smiled, well aware that anytime she saw Riki he was wearing the bracelet with his name on it. That and his single ring was the only jewelry she ever saw him wear, but she decided to play with him some more.

“Oh really?” she huffed. “And who’d you scam that out of?” She glanced at Iason, who was watching their exchange with interest. “This guy is a pretty good manipulator, especially when he turns those puppy dog eyes on you. He’s already conned me out of some of my best pieces.”

“Conned!” Riki exclaimed. “I’ve never conned you. All our deals were fair and square.”

“Keep dreamin’ kid.”

“It’s true!”

“So then what kind of deal did you strike for that bauble on your wrist then, hey?”

“Shut up.” Riki’s gaze softened as he rubbed his fingers against the metal of his bracelet. “It was a gift.”

Carrie watched the young mongrel glance up at the Blondie and approved of the quiet exchange. “Oh. I see.”

She was pleased that Riki seemed okay with being with Iason Mink, she was worried over someone like him being a pet, but the pair had obviously reached some sort of agreement. She had also noticed the broach she had traded Riki for was prominently featured on Iason’s tunic.

“Why exactly were you so excited to see Riki?” Iason inquired.

“Oh! Because of the sign he did for me. I’ve had more sales in the past two weeks than I’ve had in almost two months!”

“I see. So it was an expression of gratitude?”

“You bet.” She smiled at Riki. “You did a great job, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid,” Riki reminded. “And how grateful are you?”

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed. “What are you planning to con me out of now?”

Riki bit down on his smirk and nonchalantly pointed at a small scenic globe on one of the shelves behind her. “How much is that?”

His choice surprised her, for the globe wasn’t actually part of her wares. It had been given to her by her mother’s mother, on the day that she loaned Carrie the money to get off planet and start her own shop, many, many years ago. It was her talisman of courage for whenever the days looked bleak or when she worried that she wouldn’t have enough money to get through another year.

She reached up and pulled down the globe that held the scene of a lush forest surrounding a waterfall. The hologram gave the illusion of the water actually flowing, and the trees moving in the wind. It didn’t have the option of sound or multiple scene choice like some of the more popular ones did, this one was little more than a cheap toy.

Offering it to Riki, she watched his dark eyes light up for a fraction of a second before he shaded them again with his usual disinterest. “It’s free,” she said softly and watched his head bolt up in surprise.

“Free?” He scowled. “Why? You don’t think I can afford it?”

“I’ll pay for whatever Riki wants,” Iason assured, but Carrie only smiled as she thought of the woman who had helped her find the courage to start her life anew.

“No, I mean, it isn’t for sale. It’s not part of my merchandise.” When they both still seemed confused. “My Mere-Mere gave it to me long ago, when I was starting out on a new journey. I had hoped to give it to my child one day, but I never had any.”

“Oh.” Riki tried not to feel disappointed when he offered the globe back to her. “Then, you’d better keep it.”

Carrie looked up at Iason, who nodded his approval, then back at Riki. “I’d like you to have it, Riki. I hope that it will bring you the same peace and contentment that it has brought me.”

“I...”

Riki didn’t know what to say. He had never had anyone give him something for nothing before. People had tried but that always felt like he owed him and so he would have to repay the favor somehow. Iason gave him things, but took it out of his body in trade, so it wasn’t the same.

“I have to do something...I can’t just...”

“You did do something.” She waved at her sign. “You did an amazing thing, worth far more than just a silly old globe.”

“But it isn’t silly,” Riki said quietly as he stared at the scene. “It’s beautiful.”

Carrie bit her lip as tears prickled her eyes, and she couldn’t even understand why. “Hearing you say that has increased its worth, so now we’re even again.”

Riki looked at Iason, who only smiled at him. “Then, thank you.” He wrapped his hands around the top globe and enjoyed the coolness of the glass surrounding it. “I’ll take really good care of it.”

“I know you will.”

Riki suddenly looked up. “What’s a Meremere?”

“A Mere-Mere is a term my people use to describe the parents of our parents. The mother of my mother.”

Riki’s eyes widened as he felt something clench in his gut. “You...*knew* your mother’s mother?”

“Yes, and my Mere Pere as well, my mother’s father. They lived with us for most of my life.”

“Together? In the same place?”

“Yes.”

“What...what was that like?”

Carrie smirked. “Crowded.” She saw how intensely Riki was staring at her and realized that a mongrel from Ceres would probably not understand the concept of grandparents or family. “And wonderful.”

“Oh.”

“Riki,” Iason began, putting his hand on Riki’s shoulder. “We should continue if you want to look at anything else, as we’ll have to return home soon.”

“Yeah, okay.” He looked at Carrie. “Can I have something to put this in? I don’t want to drop it.”

“Sure.” She quickly retrieved a shatterproof box, wrapped the globe and placed it inside, then set it in a gift bag. “Here you go. Enjoy the festival.”

“Yeah. Good luck with the sales.”

“Thanks!”

Carrie smiled as Riki turned away then started as a pale hand covered her own. She looked up into devastatingly beautiful blue eyes.

“Thank you,” Iason said simply then turned and quickly caught up with his pet.

Carrie looked at her hand, surprised. She’d hadn’t expected a Blondie to feel warm.

Riki and Iason moved through the market place, until they were satisfied that they had seen at most of what was being offered. They paused at a stall close to the gates of Tanagura where a man was selling some sort of lizard creature with a line of bristly fur across the top of its head and down over its back.

“You want to hold one?” the sales man offered Riki, but his eyes were on the tall Blondie behind him. “They are very tame.”

“Sure.” Riki hooked the gift bag Carrie had given him over his wrist and fearlessly held out his hand.

The merchant placed one of the small lizards in his palm. He ran his finger across the fur, watched the lizard’s tongue flick out as its bulging yellow eyes lazily flicked around. He looked at the ridiculously small transparent cages that the lizards were kept in, then back at the amphibian in his hand.

“Are they dangerous?” Iason asked.

“Oh no.”

“What do they eat?”

“Insects mostly. They make a very good pet, very little maintenance.”

Watching Riki closely, curious about the mongrel’s interest, Iason moved closer. “Do you want it, Riki?”

Again, Riki’s gaze lingered on the small square boxes. “Yeah.”

Iason blinked in surprise, but then nodded. “Very well.”

The merchant eagerly took the lizard back from Riki, placed it in the small, see-thru box and handed it back to the mongrel. He then produced a small bag of live feed and lifted the receiver for Iason's credit chip. "You will enjoy it, I am sure."

"You may deliver it to..."

"No. I'll take him with us," Riki said quietly, then lifted dark eyes to the Blondie beside him. "Okay?"

There was a strange look in Riki's eyes but Iason didn't press him. "As you wish."

Iason noticed that Riki had headed off without him, grabbed the feed and moved to catch up. He placed his hand on Riki's shoulder. "You should wait for me, pet." He felt Riki stiffen under his touch. "I didn't mean that."

Riki's shoulders slumped and he nodded. "I know."

He lifted the small box in his hand and watched the creature inside stare back at him, as if in defeat. Poor bastard, he thought, trapped in a small box to be stared at or molested by whoever desires it. Glancing at Iason from the corner of his eye, the similarities between his and the lizard's situation was ironic. But at least Iason had tried to make things a little better for him, and he was here by choice now. Still, he wished he could make Iason understand why it was so wrong to keep a pet.

"Can we go outside?"

"Outside?"

"Past the city limits."

An unreasonable fear gripped Iason's chest, but he willed himself to be calm. "Why?"

Riki turned and looked up at him. "I want to show you something. We can come right back."



The fact that Riki had agreed to return released some of Iason's anxiety, but not all. "Very well." He called for a car and they moved out of the marketplace area to a pickup area.

They drove through the gates of Tanagura and down the two-lane roadway. "Where would you like to go?" Iason asked.

"Just a little further."

Iason complied and they drove for another twenty minutes, until you could see the glow of the Tanagura's city lights but nothing else.

"Here." Riki said and Iason pulled over to the side of the road.

There was nothing as far as the eye could see but desert and a few spots of foliage. Why did Riki wish to stop here? Alarm speared through him as Riki opened his car door, and Iason's hand latched onto Riki's wrist.

This was almost the exact spot where he had set Riki free so many years ago. Was the Mongrel intending to run? Had all the talk of mothers and family inspired him to try run away and search for a better life somewhere else?

When Riki turned to him, he wore the gentlest expression that Iason had ever witnessed.

"I'll be right back," he promised, waited patiently for Iason to release him, which still took almost a minute, then reached for the bag of feed and the caged lizard and stepped out of the car.

Needing to keep Riki in his line of sight, and curious as to what the mongrel intended, Iason also stepped out of the vehicle and watched as Riki walked off of the road and headed several meters into the desert. Riki knelt in the dirt, set the bag of feed beside him, then carefully removed the lizard from its cage.

Riki seemed to be talking to it, but Iason was too far away to hear what Riki was saying, even with his exceptional android hearing. A moment later,

Iason watched Riki set the lizard on the ground and prod it to move away from him.

Iason put a hand to his chest, finding the scene almost too familiar as he watched the lizard hesitate, and then a few seconds later it started to slink backwards, then reared up on its tiny hind legs and started to run for the nearest cover of brush.

Riki opened the bag of feed and dropped it onto the ground then quickly backed up as insects crawled or flew out. Distancing himself enough that the bugs wouldn't get on him, Riki watched the lizard disappear under the cover of a small bush, then saw a long tongue come out to catch the insects that were flying over it.

Iason continued to watch Riki, who had not moved from his position for several minutes, and tried to understand the purpose of what he had just witnessed. Why had Riki released the animal, when he had said he'd wanted it? Why would he not keep it for company? It would not survive out here for long, there were much larger predators that would kill or eat it soon enough. Would it have not been better to take the pet home and keep it sheltered, keep it fed and protected?

Finally, Riki turned, shoved his hands in his pockets and walked back. He didn't speak until he was standing in front of Iason again.

"You don't understand, do you?" Riki asked.

"I admit I am confused by your actions. Why purchase the beast if you had no intention to keep it?"

"Because it was being kept in a cage."

"Yes, but it will not survive out here, Riki. It has a few hours of freedom at the most before it is prey for a larger animal."

"I know."

“Then why would you do this?”

Riki turned to look back the way he had come. “Because even if it’s only an hour, a day, or a week, he’s free, Iason. If he dies, he dies on his terms. If he lives, he lives on his terms. Either way, he’s free.”

Iason processed Riki’s highly illogical words and referenced them with another sources to help him understand. The rebellion of the slaves on the blue planet Earth. The massacre of most of the Obadita race, who had captured and bred wild animals for sport for centuries, before the creatures naturally evolved enough to fight back and kill their captors. And the Ents of Enterbryn, a forest planet that was routinely harvested for the convenience of off-worlders, who did not care that the plants and trees were sentient creatures. The trees had managed to start a fire and allowed themselves to be consumed by it, until the entire planet was an empty burned husk. They had chosen death to a life of being cut down and shredded, or taken home to be placed in a small square room without family or friends, for some rich being to show off and enjoy.

Iason understood about slavery, understood that it was a large basis of Jupiter’s rule, to have the more powerful beings rule and subjected the less powerful, but that was necessary to maintain order. The superior beings needed to be in a higher position, as the Humans had proven time and time again that all they could manage to do was hurt each other.

Still, in those instances, the slaves were treated poorly. Pets of Tanagura were not usually treated that way, they were given most things that other Humans desired, at least for the time they were with a Master. What happened after that had never been a concern for Iason, nor did he intend for it to become one.

“Is that how you feel, Riki? You would rather be free to face such challenges and dangers alone? You feel that is a better choice than what you have now.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Again that strange pain tingled through Iason's chest. "So, you wish to leave? It has come to this?"

"No." Riki sighed heavily and turned back to Iason. "I made my choice and I'll stand by it Iason. I am trying to show you how hard a choice it's been and how..." He ran a hand through his hair. "I guess how I still want to break free from you and Tanagura and all of that."

"Riki."

Riki stepped closer, and slid his arms around Iason's waist so he could lay his head against his chest. "I won't though, because with you is where I'm supposed to be. It's who I am now, and there's no going back. So...don't be afraid, okay. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you." Iason embraced him and closed his eyes. "I...will try and understand your sacrifice better, Riki. I am sorry that this hurts you."

"Yeah. I know."

They stood there by the side of the road until the sky grew dark, then Riki pulled back and looked up at Iason. "I'm cold," he murmured. "Take me home and make me warm."

Iason bent his head and kissed Riki tenderly. "As you wish, my love."

## Chapter 16

### Summary for the Chapter:

Guy learns more about Shiao, Raoul is up to no good and Cal makes a new discovery.

Guy was grilling some vegetables on the stove with the Vid-screen on as company, when he heard the news-droid mention Tanagura. His head turned to see the familiar skyline of the city that ever mongrel had grown up despising, and then the scene switched to people milling about colorfully decorated streets.

“It’s another crowded day at the Festival for Junpin here in the Capital city of Tanagura’ everyone on Amoï must be here, and there is certainly plenty to see. Jugglers, dancers, artisans and a wide range of off world treasures to buy. Of course the real reason people come here is to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Elite, some of who have been very generous in their appearances today.”

Guy dropped the utensil he was using as he spotted a familiar Blondie walking among the crowds of the marketplace, and with him, a dark haired man.

“Riki.”

Guy moved towards the Vid-screen and touched the panel where his former pairing partner’s face was. Riki was smirking up at Iason Mink, as the Blondie smiled and slipped an arm around the mongrel’s shoulders. A moment later, the scene changed to show other Elites and then a wide shot of the busy market.

What was *that*? What *was* that...that look on Riki’s face? He had never seen that expression on Riki before. It wasn’t anger, or annoyance. It certainly wasn’t pleasure or even joy. What the hell was that and why had he had such an expression when looking at fucking Iason Mink?

“The food is burning.”

Guy flinched and spun around as Shiao turned off the stove and moved the pan of vegetables to a cooler area. “S...sorry.” He stepped away from the Vid-screen as a spear of guilt stabbed through him. “I’ll make something else.”

“What are you watching?”

“Nothing.” Guy took the burned vegetables and dumped them in the recycler, then opened the refrigerator to see what else he could throw together.

“We’ll order in later,” Shiao said as he picked up the remote and switched off the news. “I’d like a bath.”

“Okay,” Guy nodded and wiped his hands on a towel. “I’ll go prepare it.”

“Wait.”

Guy paused in the doorway, but did not turn back.

“Did you ever get a reply to your letter?”

“No.”

Guy climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered the large bathing area. He turned on the water, fiddled with the nobs until he had the temperature to what he knew Shiao preferred, then added some scented oil.

Riki, why? Why did you have to look at Mink that way? Why can’t you see him for the monster he is? He thought about what he had written in his letter to Riki, and realized that even if he got a response, it would not be the one he was secretly hoping for. The look on Riki’s face made sense now and it stabbed through Guy’s heart harder than any physical blade could. Riki truly belonged to someone else now, and Riki was...God! Riki was...*content* with that choice.

Guy hadn't realized that he had fallen to his knees or that tears were streaming down his face, until he felt a pair of strong hands on his shoulders. He looked up, ashamed, into Shiao's face, then allowed the Onyx to help him to his feet.

"Sorry," he muttered, feeling foolish as Shiao wiped at his tears with some tissue and requested he blow to clear his nose, which he did. "I'm such a fucking mess."

Instead of commenting, Shiao disrobed and settled into the enormous bathing tub, then held out his hand to Guy.

Guy ran a hand over his ravaged face to pull himself back to the task at hand, quickly removed his clothes and stepped in. As he picked up a bathing sponge and started to kneel facing the Elite, Shiao pulled him around so that his back lay against Shiao's lean chest.

"We'll wash in a bit," he said quietly as he wrapped an arm around Guy and slid them both forward so that they were both submerged in the scented water almost up to their shoulders. "Let us just relax for a bit, hmmm?"

Guy felt a little awkward at first, they had never lain like this in the bath before, and Shiao had certainly never put his arm around him, but between the heat of the water and the gentle scent rising from it, he felt himself slowly relaxing.

"How was your day?" he asked, knowing that Shiao liked to have conversation during his bath, that was part of being a companion.

"It was like every other day."

"Is everything okay with the plant? No problems?"

"None." Usually Shiao was very talkative about work, at least more so than he was today, and Guy was at a sudden loss of what else to discuss. "Are the sales for the bikes still okay?"

"Yes, they are doing very well."

Guy scowled, sat up and turned to look at Shiao, who was leaning his head back with his eyes closed. “Is anything wrong?”

“Yes. You are talking when I want you to be quiet.”

Guy flushed and faced forward again. “Sorry.” An arm came around him again and pulled him back into Shiao’s bare chest.

“No. I am sorry. It is not a good time for me.”

“Is work...”

“It is not work.”

Guy lay there and tried not to dwell on the fact that they were laying in such an intimate fashion. They had seen each other naked numerous times, it was hard to wash a body when it wasn’t naked, but Guy had never felt this intimately close to Shiao before and he was hoping like hell that his own body didn’t start reacting.

It had been a very, very long time since someone had held him, even longer since he’d had sex. Shiao had a magnificent body, even if it was artificial, and Guy would have to be blind not to feel some sort of attraction. But Shiao was an Elite, and that meant they could only ever be employer and employee and, of course, friends.

Riki and he had been friends. Riki had been his one true friend and now he had been completely abandoned. He would never have that same kind of bond with Shiao, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be friends on some level. As he recalled the newscast, he felt his heart sink again, but then something else occurred to him. Junpin was a festival for all Elites, yet Shiao had made no mention of a trip to Amoï.

“Should I pack a case for you?”

Shiao opened one eye. “Am I going somewhere?”

“Don’t you have to go back for the last day of the festival? For the Joining with Jupiter?”



Shiao closed his eye. “No.”

The water splashed slightly as Guy sat up and turned to face the Onyx again. “What do you mean, no? Don’t all Elites have to attend?”

“I don’t.”

“But you’re an Elite!”

Shiao opened his eyes, stared up at the ceiling for a long moment, before he sat up, bringing his face just a few inches from Guy’s. “I am a first Edition Onyx. Do you understand what that means?”

“No.”

“It means that I am part of the original series, before the name Elite came into existence.” He paused to see if Guy would catch on. “I am part of the first androids that Jupiter created.”

“Doesn’t that make you more important?”

Shiao’s expression softened and he reached up a wet hand to caress Guy’s cheek. “That is a lovely thought, thank you, but no. It means that I was part of the series that was flawed. Part of the series that Jupiter terminated, once she found a better balance.”

“Terminated?” Guy turned fully so he was on his knees in the bath. “You mean, Jupiter killed them all?”

“Yes.”

“But...Why?”

“Because we are flawed.”

Guy shook his head. “But you’re not flawed. Your kind and smart and honest and strong and....”

“And ridiculously tall, overly judgmental and underdeveloped emotionally.”

“That’s bullshit! How can you say that? Who cares if you’re tall? I’m tall too, so what? And you have emotions! You feel more than that fucker Mink; *you’re* not cruel or devious. For fuck sakes, you saved me, in so many ways, and gave me a chance at a better life. There is nothing wrong with you at all and I’ll fucking tell that to Jupiter myself!”

Shiao smiled wearily. “I appreciate your vigor, but that would do more harm than good.”

Guy huffed and tried to swallow his anger. “Why...I mean, how did you escape?”

“The only way I could, I ran.” Shiao sat back again and suddenly felt very tired. “Others did as well, but Jupiter found them and they were terminated.”

“How?”

“We were all created with a special implant in our brain. A kill switch if you like. All she had to do was learn where we were and reach out mentally to flip the switch.”

Guy swallowed. Was the AI really that powerful? That vengeful? “So... does that mean you’re the last one...of the originals?”

Shiao nodded.

“How...How did you survive?”

“I stole a ship and fled the planet. The others wanted to live, as I did, but not enough to completely break with Jupiter. They could not leave Amoï, and it was their downfall.”

“But you did. You survived.”

“Yes.”

“Wait...I mean, you go back to Amoï pretty often, right? Isn’t that dangerous? If Jupiter realizes you’re there can’t it flip that switch on you

too?”

“She already knows that I exist.”

Guy felt his blood grow cold at the idea that Shiao could just suddenly die on the whim of a computer generated God. “Then...then don’t go back!” He gripped Shiao’s shoulders. “Promise me you won’t ever go back to Amoï!”

“Are you afraid for me, Guy?”

“Yes! Of course I am! Why aren’t you? Are you even safe here? Do we need to go away, go further away...” Guy’s words were cut off as Shiao caught his arm and tugged him down with a splash, causing their chests to press together and Guy to gasp at the sudden contact. “What...?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Shiao assured gently as he ran his fingers through Guy’s hair. “Though I appreciate your offer to run away with me, Guy. I am very grateful for your friendship.”

“But...But what if Jupiter finds you? What if...?”

“I faced Jupiter many years ago and we made a deal. I am in no danger.”

“How? What kind of deal?”

“She decided to allow me to live if I would assist her with a special project.”

“What if she changes her mind?”

“She won’t, and she can’t. Part of the deal was that I had my kill switch removed.”

At Shiao’s reassurance, Guy realized how afraid he was at the idea of losing him. He was sure it was just because the Onyx had been so good to him, because he felt he owed a debt that could never be repaid. Still, he was startled at the ferocity of his own emotions regarding Shiao at that moment.

He started to relax and had to admit that having his hair played with was really nice. No one had done that since Riki. Riki loved to play with his hair during sex, which was one of the reasons he had kept it as long as he did. Maybe he would grow it out again, if Shiao liked it that way too...No. what was he thinking? Why would he do that just to please Shiao? Shiao was his employer and friend, nothing more. They could never be anything more. Shiao was not Riki.

“So, you’re safe?” he finally asked, trying to get his mind off of the mild panic that was growing inside of him because of these weird feelings he was having.

“Well, there is nothing stopping Jupiter from ordering my capture and extermination, however I am of little significance to her now, and I don’t believe it would come to that. Still, there are always people who hate my kind, or have a grudge against us, so I couldn’t say that for absolute certainty.”

Guy recalled how he was one of those people who hated the Elites, and how he had plotted against Iason Mink. Another layer of guilt swam through him and he tried to shrug him off. Shiao was different from the others. Shiao had never taken his choice away as Mink did with Riki. Shiao had only ever offered him choices and let him make up his own mind.

“What was the project?”

“I gave her some of my stem cells.”

Guy sat up again. “What...what’s a stem cell?”

“They are cells that assist with body function and repair by creating new cells.”

“But...you’re an android. Your body is artificial.”

“My brain is organic.”

“Is that...is that where they were taken from? The cells?”

“Yes.”

Why? I thought Jupiter killed off your kind because you were flawed?”

“Yes, but something unexpected happened. When I broke from Jupiter and had to make a life on my own, I changed. My emotions, which were very unstable at the time levelled out, as did my reasoning. In a startling way, I evolved into something new and she was fascinated by that.”

“So...maybe if she had let the others stay alive long enough, they might have evolved too?”

“Perhaps, but Jupiter wanted perfection, and she did not wish to wait for it.”

Guy lay back against Shiao again, surprised at how comfortable it was. “So...what did she want your brain cells for?”

“Stem cells, and they were for her newest project at the time.”

“You mean, a new series of Elites?”

“No. This was just one Elite. A very special one, in Jupiter’s mind.” Please don’t ask me anymore, Shiao requested silently, for he suspected that if Guy knew the truth, their friendship would shatter.

“Oh. “ Guy picked up the bath sponge, added some liquid soap to it and began to lather the arm that was wrapped around him. “Well, I guess if it got you a deal to be safe it must have been worth it.”

“I don’t think about it. I received what I wanted and Jupiter received what she wanted. Now she allows me to live on my own, and do business with the other Elite’s, but I am not truly accepted by them.”

Guy sat, turned and started to wash Shiao’s chest, more comfortable with their usual routine than just lying in the bath watching his skin prune. “You don’t do the seclusion thing with others then, to see Jupiter?”

“No.”

The sponge paused against Shiao's stomach. "Does it...hurt that you can't?"

"Hurt? I do not feel pain, Guy."

Although, the years he had spent away from Amoï and out of contact with Jupiter had resulted in a kind of agony, he could not call it pain. It was if there was this gaping chasm dragging through his body at all times, and he had nothing that he could fill it with.

"I mean...were you sad or upset or lonely?"

"I do not believe so." Shiao would never admit to anything like that, he had to keep a tight rein on his emotions or risk falling back into the chaos of his beginning.

"Would you go, if you could I mean? Would you want to see Jupiter again?"

This was a harder question to answer. Shiao would give almost anything to stand before Jupiter again. He felt no animosity, no anger towards her. She had given him life, and by his own actions, he had cut her out of that life. Being in her presence that last time had been the most frightening, and the most divine experience of his life.

"I cannot see Jupiter again, so considering it is a waste of energy."

"Is that why you came looking for me?" Guy asked quietly as he moved down and lifted Shiao's long leg to wash it. "Because you were lonely?"

"Perhaps of a kind. You have definitely made my existence more fulfilling, Guy. So I thank you for that."

Guy shrugged. "It's what you pay me for."

"Indeed."

"And...I'd do it anyway, because we're...friends now."

“Yes.” Shiao pulled the sponge away from Guy’s hand and tilted the mongrel’s chin up so he could properly look him in the eyes. “Are you feeling better?”

Had Shiao suggested the bath for himself or because he sensed Guy was upset? The Onyx often insisted that he didn’t feel emotions the way Humans did and yet he obviously felt compassion and loneliness, even if he didn’t admit to it.

“Can I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“What sort of things did you...do with your pet, before I mean?”

“The things one usually does.” Shiao lowered his gaze and watched Guy shift his legs closer together. “Do you wish me to play with you, Guy?”

“No!” Guy stood up suddenly and stepped out of the bath. “I...I don’t want that!” He grabbed a towel and stormed out of the bathroom.

Shiao stared after him and then sighed. “I suppose I shall have to finish the washing myself then.”

After doing so, he dressed and entered the living room. He ordered some food, then moved to the kitchen, expecting to find Guy there. When he wasn’t, he headed back upstairs and stopped outside Guy’s bedroom door. He knocked.

“Guy? I have ordered some food. Will you not come down and have a meal with me?”

“I can’t!” came a voice from the other side of the door.

“Are you ill? Shall I call a doctor?”

“No!” There was moment of silence and then the door opened a crack, though Guy stayed behind it. “I’m...Embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“Because I...I got...hard in the bath.”

Shiao chuckled. “Is that not a natural reaction for Humans?”

“Not for me!” Guy shuffled on the other side of the door, wishing just for once that Shiao wasn’t so oblivious. “Why...why did you offer to...do that?”

“Do what?”

Furious at the obtuse Onyx, Guy ripped open the door and faced him. “Play with me, for fucks sake! I’m not your pet, so why would you say that?”

Shiao lifted one eyebrow. “To help relieve you of course.”

“But you don’t like me that way, right?” Guy was appalled to find he was holding his breath for Shiao’s answer. When had he started feeling attraction to the Onyx? Had it been days, weeks? He thought about Shiao way too much, lately, but he couldn’t help wanting to be around him and to please him.

“I’m unclear what way you are referring to, Guy. If you mean do I see you as a pet, I most certainly do not.”

“Then...you don’t find me attractive?” Shit! What was he a girl? Fishing for fucking compliments? “I...I mean...what I mean is...”

“Yes.”

Shiao’s simple, no hesitation answer robbed Guy of his words.

“You...do?”

“Yes of course. You are a beautiful Human.”

Guy felt the heat sting his cheeks and hated himself for it, Despite the bravado and strength he had shown while he was with Bison, he had never



been very good at accepting compliments. “I...you too. I mean...I think you’re attractive too, Shiao.”

“Thank you.” Shiao moved away from the door. “Shall we go down? The food should be here soon.”

Guy stared at the Elite’s departing back, trying to comprehend what had just happened. If Shiao found him attractive, why hadn’t he ever made a move on him? They took baths together almost every night, they lived together, so there was plenty of opportunity. So then why?

Stuck in his own confusing thoughts, Guy realized that Shiao had disappeared from his sight and he hurried downstairs to catch up with him.

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“Ah, Katze,” Raoul rose as the former Furniture stepped through the transport shield into the luxurious penthouse. “Good of you to come.”

“I had a choice?” Katze replied blandly and waved away the young boy who moved forward to take his jacket. “I’ll keep it on, thanks.”

“No, you didn’t,” Raoul agreed and indicated the sofa where he had been reclining. “I was just being polite. Have a seat.”

“Is this going to take long? I have a lot of work to do.” The festival was one of the prime times to move unlicensed and illegal product off planet. He was losing money and time being here. He also had a few leads to follow up on for Iason regarding Riki’s past, and if he left them too long, they would grow cold.

“It shouldn’t.” Raoul waved to his Furniture and a moment later the boy appeared with a tray and two drinks. “You prefer Ryslyan Brandy, I believe?”

He didn’t really, it was just usually all he could afford, but Katze took the drink. “So, what did you need to see me about?”

“Before I go into that, I’d like you to test something for me.”

“I’m not here to be a lab rat, Raoul.”

“It will only take a moment. Jen?”

The boy moved forward and leaned intimately close to Katze, who continued to stare at Raoul.

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“The scent Jen is wearing. Do you like it?”

“What does this have...?”

Raoul held up a hand. “Indulge me.”

Holding the Elite’s gaze, because he considered looking away would be a sign of weakness, Katze sniffed the kid’s neck. “No. I don’t like it. Are we done?”

Raoul waved the boy away. “What does it smell like?”

“Sour, like ruined food or something.”

“Interesting.” Raoul sipped his drink and folded one leg over the other. “And when you became Furniture, you had the full procedure done, is that correct?”

Katze rose. “I haven’t got the time to play around.”

“Always so impatient. Sit down and enjoy your drink. I will tell you the reason I called you hear.”

Katze hesitated than sat down.

“I need to ask you about Iason.”

“What about him?”

“Have you been in contact with him lately?”

Katze took a sip of his drink. “I’m not at liberty to discuss my dealings with Iason, not even with you.”

“I suspected you would say that. I am Iason’s most trusted friend, you know.”

No, Katze denied silently. Raoul may be a friend to Iason, but Iason’s complete trust was left to only one person, that was him, and he had worked hard to earn that level of faith. “Then you should talk to Iason if you want to know such things.”

“Ah, he can be quite secretive at times, as you know.”

“That isn’t my...” Katze paused as a wave of dizziness hit him. He shook it off. “If you want to...” Another wave, this one stronger, and he looked down at the glass in his hand. “You bast...” He began before he slumped sideways on the sofa, unconscious.

“You are stubbornly loyal,” Raoul murmured as he set Katze’s glass on the table and then lifted the young man into his arms. “But I must do what must be done. As I cannot count on you to speak truthfully to me, I must find another way.”

He carried Katze to his office, because he did not want to risk being overheard, not even by his staff. He set Katze in a high-back leather chair and quickly bound him to it, enough to secure him, but not so that he would be uncomfortable. He wished the bonds were not necessary, but he had studied this mongrel for a while now and he knew they would be.

Returning to the portal leading to his office, he programmed it to deny entrance and pressed a switch to soundproof the room. As he waited for Katze to wake up, he poured himself a glass of wine, then moved to the leather sofa and sat down.

Katze awoke moments later, and Raoul watched as the black market dealer became fully aware and realized his situation. Expecting anger, outrage or fear, Raoul was fascinated when Katze simply lifted his head and stared at him, with no expression whatsoever.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Nothing you do surprises me, Raoul,” Katze replied tonelessly.

“Really? I believe what you called me earlier refutes that claim.”

“That wasn’t surprise that was honesty.”

Raoul smirked; no other human would dare speak to him that way. “And what are you feeling now? I really can’t tell. Usually you Humans are pitifully expressive, but you must have been trained very well.”

“Is that why I’m here, trussed to your chair? To discuss my training?”

“Oh, that *would* be an interesting conversation and we may get to that later, however the drug I gave you should be taking full effect any moment now, so I’ll have you answer my important questions first. “

Drug? What sort of drug could Raoul have possibly given him? He was immune to aphrodisiacs and had built up an immunity to the current truth drugs that were out there. In his business there could be no bargaining chip, no quick route to gather information from him. They could torture him of course, but he had an out for that as well, eventually.

Because he knew that Raoul wanted him to ask about what he had been given, he deliberately swallowed the question.

Raoul smiled knowingly. “When was the last time you spoke with Iason.”

“As I said, my commun...” Katze paused and could literally feel a strange tickle in his brain and his heart throbbed violently as he continued. “The night before last.” His eyes narrowed and his stoic expression slipped as he pulled against his bonds. “*Don’t* do this.”

“I must do this. I must be sure Iason is safe.”

“You think I could hurt Iason?”

“No, you seem absolutely loyal, but I cannot allow my feelings to interfere, I have to be sure.”

“He is my Master. I would never betray him.”

“Is he your master? He freed you from being a Furniture did he not?”

Katze shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I am loyal to him. I would never hurt him.”

“Then answer my questions.”

“I am never to speak of my time with him. I can never say what is discussed unless he gives me leave to. As an Elite you know that kind of order cannot be disobeyed.”

“I do, and that is why I must resort to such measures.” Raoul sipped his wine. “What is the primary matter you are working on for Iason?”

“I can’t...” Again! It was happening again and Katze was appalled that he couldn’t fight it. What the hell had Raoul given him? “Riki.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow. “What about Riki?”

“He....he’s not from here...” Katze no longer cared about his expression or demeanor; he was pouring everything into fighting the drug. “Stop this....”

“No slum mongrels are from Tanagura. Why is that of interest?”

The veins on Katze’s neck bulged as he struggled to break his bonds, struggled to fight on every level. “No...Not...can’t...from...planet...God!”

He couldn’t say anymore. He couldn’t betray Iason this way, not even to Raoul. It didn’t matter if Raoul thought he was protecting Iason, if anyone

else knew about this Iason and Riki would both be in danger. Atop that, Iason would never trust him again, and if he lost Iason's trust...

"F...Fuck you," he said and slid his tongue over his left eyetooth, removing the cap and releasing the tasteless liquid inside.

"What are you...?" Raoul began as Katze's eyes rolled up into his head. "Katze!" He moved with lightening speed, ripping the bonds off of the redhead and shoved his finger down Katze's throat. "Damn you!"

Iason *would* kill him if Katze died. He was just asking questions for Jupiter's sake! Why was this Furniture so incessantly loyal? What were he and Iason hiding?

Katze's heart felt like it was going too exploded from his chest, even as he vomited violently all over Raoul's carpet, and then he was dimly aware of being lifted. He hadn't wanted to die, but he was always ready to do so. Pushing back his fear, he hoped that Iason would fuck the interfering Elite up in the worst way. This was his final thought before he lost conscious.

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Cal's eyes quickly scanned over the off world articles in the research room he occupied at the Central Archives. He'd found a few leads to Riki's origin and had wanted to follow up before bringing them to Iason's attention. He didn't want to get Riki's hopes up unless he had concrete information. His new registration number gave him access to several areas on Eos and Tanagura that others were not permitted, and he was taking advantage of that.

He had seen something on the news the other day that had sparked his interest because it gave him a new avenue to search. A child had been lost in Midas and the reporter was speaking to the father at the scene. Cal figured most people would report a missing child, so he had started going over all off world news reports about missing children, starting from about twenty cycles ago and working forward.

They were endless, not just the cases of missing children, but the number of planets where he had to search through different news items. Some worlds did not have interspace broadcast capability, so if Riki was from one of those worlds there would be no way to trace the mongrel's origin back to them. Cal could only hope that Riki was from a more advanced planet. If it was a planet outside of their solar system, there would be no way to find it.

He'd began to notice a pattern in some of the disappearance cases from about fifteen cycles ago, usually correlating with sightings of a lizard-like race called the Zuntil. There were twelve cases where children had gone missing or disappeared after their parents or guardians were attacked or killed by Zuntil ships. Of the twelve, five planets were water planets. As Riki had mentioned a forest and a lake from what he remembered, Cal knew it would have to be one of those three.

His excitement grew as he looked through photographs of one of those five planets now. It was highly advanced race, and the cities sported striking modern architecture, but outside of the cities were flourishing farmlands, miles of natural forests and two oceans that lead to several lake formations.

Clicking on the next file, he opened screen shots of the local people and his heart almost stopped. He opened another file, then another, as his heart started to beat rapidly in his chest. Dark skin, dark hair and eyes. Just like Riki! So many of them looked like Riki!

He saved the file to his data pad with the other information he'd gathered from previous searches, then spotted a small banner at the lower left corner. Clicking it, his eyes widened as he studied the picture and read over the caption. Quickly demanding the computer to search for the names in the article and reference them with the missing children notices, he watched as dozens of articles and news reports started popping up all over his screen.

"Holy Jupiter!" he whispered as he tried to read through them all, but they were never ending. He had to get this to Master Iason! He had to...

"What are you doing?"

Cal glanced behind him, startled to find Bean standing in the doorway. “Why are you here?” he demanded and switched off the monitor in front of him, effectively hiding the articles from the other boy.

“The Master and his pet are at the festival and I had some free time.” Bean stepped in. “You really must like to read a lot to even come here and look for more things to read.”

“Yes, well. It’s my job.”

Cal had managed to avoid the unpleasant Furniture since that day in the kitchen where he had attacked Bean. He had been preparing his own meals and eating in his room to try and avoid another encounter that might lead to Master Iason having to punish them again. Of course, it also gave him more time to research when he wasn’t teaching Riki.

While Bean also had access to a portion of the archives, as other Furniture did, his clearance level was much lower than Cal’s.

“Still working so hard to impress the pet?”

“If you have no duty here, please leave.” Cal turned back to the monitor, but then he felt a warm breath in his ear as Bean leaned in from behind and whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

Cal looked sideways, startled. “What for?”

“For giving you a difficult time.” Bean leaned against the desk so he was now facing Cal. “I was worried your coming back meant I would be sent away. I was afraid.”

Cal’s expression softened, for he’d had a few of those feelings himself initially, about Bean taking his place in the Master’s household. “I understand. I’m not trying to usurp your position, honestly. My role is different and I will not interfere in yours.” He held out his hand. “Can we now be friends?”



“I’d like that.” Bean smiled and shook Cal’s hand. “Friends. So, is there something I can help with?”

Cal shook his head and ordered the computer to close down as he slipped his data pad into his bag. He would have to come back and get the rest of the information, but he had enough now to go to Riki and Iason. He had proof of where Riki came from!

“I was just heading out.”

“Are you going to the festival?”

“I might, for a little while.”

Bean nodded. “Okay. See you at home.”

“Yes. See you.” Cal could barely keep himself from running down the massive corridor of the archive building. He needed to find Master Iason and Riki. He couldn’t wait to tell them about what he found.

An inch from the portal that would take him where he wished to go, he heard someone call his name. He turned and darkness claimed him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks to everyone who commented, favored, kudo'd and made sure I was aware that you are enjoying my story. It's taking a turn now from the usual fluff, I hope you are ready. As always your comments inspire and thrill me, so please feel free to make as many of them as you like and write as much as you want to express your pleasure :) or displeasure :( at how the story is evolving.

## Chapter 17

### Summary for the Chapter:

All kinda stuff goin' on! :-)

### Notes for the Chapter:

Something to tide you over....thanks for staying tuned and for all the fantastic comments and Kudos!

“Have you found him yet?” a deep voice demanded from the monitor, their face shadowed by darkness.

“Yes, Sarrum.” A tall hooded man sat facing the monitor. “We will have him this evening.”

“What of the android? Has it been destroyed?”

“It has...proven to be more resilient than we anticipated.”

“It is a machine. How hard can it be to kill?”

“We would’ve had it in the market place, but a Human intervened. Our attempts since have all been thwarted.”

“By who?”

“Unclear. I have men looking into it.” There was a pause. “The androids will be going into seclusion soon. Would it not be better to take the boy and leave...?”

The figure on the screen moved forward, obscuring their face further. “*It* will follow. It will search for him. I want it destroyed.”

“Your will be done, Sarrum.”

“We are losing time. All has been arranged and I would have him beside me before the next Harvest. There can be no delay.”

The screen went blank and the person seated before it sighed heavily. Rising the man turned, revealing a bearded face, half hidden by his hood. He activated his com and brought it to his lips.

“The plan is to go forward. Be sure everyone is in place.”

“Yes,” a phantom, distorted voice responded from the small communicator.

“What of the cog?”

“We believe it is an Elite, but we’ve seen no evidence to confirm which one.”

“They are surrounded by pets and Furniture, find one that will talk.”

“They are amazingly loyal, for *slaves*. They harbor no hatred for the machines.”

“Someone must. We must neutralize the threat before we can move against our main target.”

“Agreed. There is a man who appears to be loyal to no one, a former Furniture who we have arranged a meeting with. I believe he can get us close to the target.”

“How can we be sure?”

“He has made no secret of his animosity for the machines.”

“Good. Good. Keep me updated.”

“Yes.”

The man shoved the com back into his pocket and then pulled out a small screen capture of a dark eyed, dark haired man. “Soon, Malku. Soon we will bring you home.”

\*\*\*\*\*

*'Boy! Where are you boy?'*

*He huddled closer under the sink cabinet and stared fearfully at the two small doors that was the only thing hiding him from the terror outside. Please pass out. Please pass out. Please, please!*

*His prayers went unanswered. The doors ripped open and bright light swarmed into the pitch-dark place as a large familiar hand reached in for him.*

*'Do your duty boy,' the Father demanded as he was hauled out of his hiding space and dragged to the bedroom. 'It's all you're good for, just like her. Just like that bitch!'*

*'Please don't,' he sobbed as he tried to struggle, but in the end found himself face down on his father's moldy smelling mattress. "Please, Papa. It hurts. Please..."*

*'You know what hurts?' the Father growled as his pants were ripped away. 'That bitch leavin' me for some Midas scum. That's what hurts.'*

*He screamed as his frail six-year-old body was penetrated from behind, but the Father didn't care if it hurt. The Father just wanted to punish him for his mother leaving. The Father hated him. He sobbed as his small body was brutalized.*

Katze was still screaming as he woke, and he instantly started to struggle at the arms that were wrapped tightly around him.

"Stop!" Raoul ordered and tightened his hold on the flailing mongrel. "You are all right, Katze. You are safe."

The words and familiar voice seemed to penetrate Katze's fogged brain and he stilled. Where was he? Why was Raoul holding him? He tried to

remember, and then recalled his choice when Raoul had tried to question him.

“You can let go now,” he stated, when he had finally managed to reign in his chaotic emotions. “I’m fine.”

Raoul’s hold lessened but he did not full release Katze. “You did not seem fine a moment ago.”

“It was nothing. Let me go.”

“Tell me what you dreamed and I will.”

Katze lifted his head and looked fully into Raoul’s green eyes. “I dreamed I died,” he lied coldly. “That you had killed me.”

Raoul experienced a strange sense of unease at the coldness in the redhead’s eyes, a feeling he had never felt with anyone. He slowly released Katze and stepped back from the med-bed where he had placed the mongrel to get him breathing again.

“Technically, had you died, it would have been your own doing. I saved you.”

Katze waited to reply, he wanted to know if whatever drug Raoul had given him was still in his system, but he realized that if it was he would not have been able to lie about his dream. Instead, he said. “Are you expecting gratitude, since it was you who forced my hand?”

Raoul glanced at the monitor over Katze’s bed as the mongrel swung his legs over the side. He’d almost lost Iason’s former Furniture to the poison from Katze’s false tooth and the fear of that had disconcerted him. He had never been afraid of anything, so it was difficult for him to believe that the death of a Human would make him so. He could not blame it on concern that Iason would be angry with him, and he could not put it to him having any sort of feelings for Katze. He only knew that he’d had to save the mongrel, at any costs.

When Katze had started screaming in his sleep, he had been unsure what to do, and so he did the only thing he could think of, he'd held him. His pets sometimes had nightmares, and he found holding them alleviated their fear. He had tried that with Katze, and while it had roused him from his slumber, Katze had become more distressed instead of calm.

"I do what I must," he repeated, as he had said before. "If I could trust you to be honest with me, I would not have had to resort to such measures..."

"Trust?" Katze demanded and hopped off the table, then immediately grabbed for it to steady himself as a wave of nausea attacked him. "You've done nothing to earn my trust, Raoul."

"I saved your life." Raoul moved forward and caught Katze's arm. "You must rest awhile longer. You are still feeling the aftereffects..."

Katze shook the Blondie's hand off. "What time is it?"

"Almost dinner time. Why?"

"Shit!" Katze glanced around the unfamiliar lab and started towards the portal. "I have somewhere to be."

"Where is that?"

"None of your business." Katze tried to step through the portal, and frowned when he could not. "What's wrong with this thing?"

"It's locked. I do not let just anyone into my lab."

"Well unlock it, I have to go."

"I will remove the lock, if you take me with you."

"No."

"You are not leaving here unless I allow it, Katze."

“You’re too recognizable. This is a covert meeting, if I show up with you I’ll lose any chance at getting information.”

“I can be invisible when I choose to, Katze.” Raoul moved over to stand beside him. “We both want Iason to be safe. Why can we not work together? Have I not proven myself after the situation with Orphe?” It irked him to admit that he had to prove himself to anyone. He was an Elite after all and it annoyed him that Katze did not always seem to recognize this fact.

Katze grit his teeth. He didn’t have time to argue. If he missed this meeting, he wouldn’t get another chance. Fuck! “Fine, but you do exactly as I say and if you ask me any more questions or try any more drugs on me, you will regret it. I don’t care if you’re a Blondie or not.”

Raoul lifted an eyebrow, both irritated and impressed with the mongrel’s bravado. “As you wish.” He decoded the lock and captured Katze’s wrist when he moved to step through. “Together,” he reminded.

Katze scowled and they stepped through the portal together.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Cal? Cal? Are you okay?”

Cal slowly opened his eyes and focused on the young boy leaning over him. “Bean?” He looked around and saw that he was lying on a med bed in a pale green room. “Where?”

“I found you unconscious in the hallway of the third floor archives,” Bean stated. “I brought you to the clinic.”

Cal scowled. The Archives? When had he gone there, and why? He tried to remember, and as he did, he started to sit up.

“Easy!” Bean insisted, catching Cal as the older boy started to slide sideways inside of forward. “You shouldn’t move around too much. You have a concussion.”

“How...how did I get here? What happened to me?”

“You don’t remember?”

Cal shook his head, winced and set back against the pillows. “No. I can’t remember anything.” He watched Bean pour him a glass of water and offer it to him. “Why...why are you being so nice to me?”

Bean frowned. “You said we could be friends now, remember?”

“I...I did?” Cal accepted the glass because he was feeling rather parched.

“You really hit your head hard, didn’t you?”

“I guess so.” There was something pressing on his brain, a thought, or an idea. Something that was telling him he had to remember, but he couldn’t think what it was.

“Do you remember where you were going?”

“No. No I don’t. I don’t even remember being in the archives.”

Bean shook his head. “You’d better stay here and let them do some more tests, just in case. Memory loss is sometimes a symptom of a more crucial injury.”

“No. I just...I think I should go home. I should...” He felt like he needed to see Master Iason. “There was something I had to tell him.”

“Tell who?”

“Master Iason.”

“What is it? I’ll tell him,” Bean offered. “You need to stay here and recover.”



“Yes, but...I can’t remember what it was I was supposed to tell him.”

Bean patted his arm. “I’m sure it will come back to you. Rest now. I’ll tell Master what happened so he doesn’t worry.”

“Okay...yeah, maybe...maybe that would be best.” Cal was suddenly very tired. He handed Bean back his empty glass. “I just need some sleep.”

“I’ll come back on check on you. Is there anything I can bring you from home? A change of clothes, or a book or something?”

“No. No I don’t...” He was so tired...but...there was something he had to do. Why couldn’t he remember? “Nothing, thanks.”

Bean clucked as he pulled the sheets up higher around Cal, watching the blond Furniture’s eyes shutter closed. “That’s it, just rest. I’ll take care of everything.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Carrie headed back to her stall after taking a moment to refresh herself in the portable showers and noticed that one of the stalls that had been there when she went in was now gone. “That’s odd,” she decided and moved towards the now vacant area.

Most people stayed through to the day after the festival, there were always stragglers and when there was the chance of a sale, any smart vendor would delay departure for it. She stared down at the trash and pieces of decoration that remained from what was a food stall. There was even a grill plate and some utensils left behind.

“Guess dey am in a hurry.”

She turned and smiled at a rotund looking creature with pale blue skin, orange eyes and a long, fur covered snout. “Hey Zak. Was their some trouble?” she asked. She had only been gone about twenty minutes, what

could have happened? The security presence was obvious, but it hadn't increased since she had left.

“Dinna-ne. Dis one he get call, I see from mine own. He change the color and packs it up. Away he goes.”

“Huh.” She crouched down and sifted through the items left behind. “Do you want any of this? It's in good shape.”

“I takes things some ready. Wait for do-do's move far.”

She smirked at the Perlth's word for security and started to rise, then spotted a small piece of paper under one of the trash bags. She reached for it, turned it over and gasped.

“You hurt?” Zak asked, snuffling with concern. “Now you change the color.”

“No. No, I'm not, but could you do me a favor, and watch my stall for me?”

“Dinna-Yey. For you is anything.”

“Thanks.” Carrie turned away and started running towards the main gates of Eos.

\*\*\*\*\*

Anjell wiped the tears from his eyes and struggled to sit up. His master had been brutal today, insisting on a private pet party with four other pets, and him as the main attraction. The other pets did everything his master had demanded, to the point of cruelty in some cases, and he could feel their hatred of him.

His naked body throbbed, painfully from multiple penetrations, his poor penis was so sore from so many ejaculations and his law felt as if it had been dislocated from what had been shoved inside of it. As he moved, he cried out as painful spikes ran through his arms and legs from being tied up

for so long. The aphrodisiac he had been told to swallow had finally worn off and left him feeling weak and nauseated.

A Furniture appeared and offered to help him bathe and dress, but Anjell couldn't handle the thought of one more person touching him. He waved the Furniture away and slowly slid off the table to the floor.

"I'll do it myself."

"As you like."

Anjell sighed, the Furniture didn't like him either. Carefully he made his way from the playroom into the bathroom, where he washed himself, then applied ointment to his injuries. His room was on the other side of the washroom with a connecting door, so he stepped inside and quickly dressed. He knew he would be expected to be ready if the master called for him again, even though even blinking seemed to hurt at this point.

Needing to quench the incredible dryness in his mouth, he teleported to the kitchen and retrieved a glass of water then stepped through to the living room, intending to find a book to read to pass the time. He had just made his selection when he heard the familiar humming of the teleporter being engaged.

Unwilling to see his master just then, afraid he'd be molested further, he ducked down behind a chair between the wall. If he was found he would be in worse trouble, but feeling as he did he just couldn't help himself.

He immediately recognized the voice of his Master, a Ruby named Rodin, and the voice of another Elite, a Platinum, whose name he could not recall.

"It will all be over this evening," his master said.

"What if we are discovered? What if Jupiter learns of our betrayal during the joining?"

"How can she?" Rodin asked. "Parasysl will wipe our memories of the others before midnight. There will be nothing to find."

“What of Mink? He already suspects, as does Raoul.”

“Suspicion is not proof, and Jupiter demands proof.”

Anjell could hear the clinking of ice in a glass and knew his master was pouring himself a drink. Why were they talking about Riki’s master? What was going to happen?

“The mongrel will be gone for good, and Mink will be unable to stop it. The boy will not be found and Jupiter will not approve Mink leaving the planet to search.”

“He will be very angry when he realizes his pet has been stolen.”

“Yes, and if we are lucky, he will be so upset he will be unable to perform his duties to Jupiter. Therefore, he will be forced to step down and someone more suitable will take his place.”

Another clink, this time of glasses toasting.

“By tomorrow, Iason Mink will be no more than a pawn in our game.”

“Indeed. Well, all this talk has made me hungry. Where is your Furniture?”

“He knows not to come unless I call, but I do not wish to eat here. Let’s go to that place in the square you like.”

“Yes. Let’s.”

Anjell slowly rose, trembling from his hiding place as the portal hummed closed behind his master and friend. Someone was going to take Riki away? How could that happen? Who would do such a thing? He had to get to Riki, he had to warn him of the danger!

“Hey! You don’t have permission to leave!” The Furniture insisted, appearing in the living room as Angell headed for the portal. “Stop, or I’ll tell the master!”

Anjell glared at him. “Don’t be such a pussy!” he cried and dove through the portal.

\*\*\*\*\*

Guy glanced up from his book as Shiao entered the living room. They’d had dinner and had been watching some screen before Shiao received a call and quickly left the room. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“I have to go to Amoï,” Shiao stated quietly. “I’m not sure when I will be back, but you can...”

Guy bolted to his feet. “I’m coming with you!”

“Guy, you cannot. I may have to meet with Iason and...”

Guy moved forward and caught Shiao’s arm. “I’m not letting you go there alone. What if Jupiter changes her mind? What if she decides to kill you?”

“That isn’t...”

“Then why are you going? You can’t meet with Jupiter. You don’t take part in the festival, so why do you suddenly have to go?”

Shiao paused. “That is not your concern. Now, you will stay here and...”

“Fuck you!” Guy insisted. “Not my concern? What the hell is that?” He suddenly had an irrational fear that Shiao would leave and be gone for years, just like Riki, or not return at all. “I thought we were friends? I thought you trusted me?”

“I do trust you, Guy.”

“Then don’t keep secrets from me! That’s all fucking Riki did was keep secrets from me. He never told me how he was feeling, or how he was

suffocating in Ceres. He never admitted how he really felt about me, or that he was thinking of leaving. Don't you do that! Not you! You can't do that to me!"

Shiao, realizing that Guy was bordering on hysterical, stepped in and folded the Human into his arms. "All right. All right, Guy." He felt the smaller man tremble against him. "You are correct. I do not intend to shut you out, only..."

Guy pulled back enough to look up at Shiao. "Only?"

"I want you safe." Shiao cupped Guy's cheek. "I cannot guarantee that if I take you to Amoī. I...I cannot go against Iason or any other Elite if you are put in danger. Do you understand?"

"Why? What are you afraid of?"

"It is not fear, Guy. I am a first generation Onyx. I have no right go against those that are superior to me."

"That's bullshit! You're just as good as them. You're better than they are!"

Shiao smiled, wistfully and pulled Guy against him again. "You are very good for my ego, Guy." And his heart he added silently. "However, it is not only that. The children of Jupiter cannot fight one another. It is forbidden. If Iason were to see you, he may wish to harm you. I would be prevented from stopping him."

"Prevented?"

"It is complicated and I cannot explain it further, there is no time."

Guy nodded and stepped back. "Okay, you can explain it to me later then. I'll go pack." He moved for the stairs.

Guy?"

Guy turned back to face the Onyx.

“Are you truly not afraid of Iason, or do you just wish to see your friend so badly that you are willing to risk getting hurt or killed?”

The idea of facing Iason again did frighten him. He'd been naive and foolish when he had gone against Iason the first time. He had underestimated the Blondie's ability to feel rage or anger, and of course, the strength of an Elite was fearsome. His arm ached suddenly, as if in memory of being torn from his shoulder.

“I am afraid of him,” he admitted quietly. “And...I guess I do hope I see Riki, but all of that is...well it's only a small part of it. I won't let you go alone, Shiao. I won't let you leave me here waiting and worrying for you for days or months or years, wondering what the hell happened. Please don't ask me to do that. I know you don't think I can do anything, but I will protect you from Jupiter and anyone else because...because you're important to me. Because you deserve to live a full life away from all that. I am strong enough to do this. Trust me to be with you. Please.”

Shiao stared at Guy, so moved by the mongrel's speech he could only nod. He watched Guy smile and then the young man was darting up the stairs. With a sigh, Shiao turned towards the windows, which offered a panoramic view of the parklands. No one had ever offered to fight with him before. No one had ever deemed him worthy of life before. He wasn't sure what to make of it all.

When his associate had contacted him and warned that something bad was going to go down in Tanagura and that Iason Mink and his mongrel were neck deep in it, he couldn't ignore the situation. He had to do whatever he could to ensure their safety, not just Iason's, but Riki's as well. Guy would be devastated if anything happened to his friend, even though they were currently estranged. He wanted to repay Guy's kindness and acceptance, and this was one way to do that.

He had meant to go alone, because it concerned him that if they did meet up with Iason, he may be forced to make a choice that would destroy him, either way. He could not kill another Elite, but beyond that, he could not kill what he had helped to create. Iason was essentially his descendant. Could

he forsake his *son* for his friend? Could a mongrel from Ceres be more worthy than a Son of Jupiter?



## Chapter 18

### Summary for the Chapter:

Holy Scenarios Batman! A whole lotta shakin' goin on!

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the wait, hopefully this long one will make up for it. I am quite nervous about this chapter, I rewrote it four times because it wasn't quite right, and then I was worried that you all might not like the turn it takes...but I hope that you like it and if you do, feel free to let me know. You can also let me know if you hate it.

Okay. DEEP BREATH! Okay, you can go ahead and read it now...I'll be over in the corner biting my nails.

Katze leaned back in the booth and sipped his bottle of sake, his eyes scanning the darkened interior of the seedy Midas club. The deep blue lighting set an erotic cast against the shaded booths where several people were engaged in a variety of acts, some business, some personal, all of them covert.

Having spent enough time in such darkened establishments as this, his vision adjusted well to the dim lighting, and he could easily see what would remain hidden to most others. The one person he could not see clearly was Raoul, who, true to his word, had effectively disappeared. He could see no sign of the Blondie anywhere, and yet he could sense those keen eyes were watching him.

He finished off his drink and lifted his hand towards the server droid for another one, just as a figure in a hooded cloak settled in the booth opposite him.

“You are Katze.”

It had not been a question, and Katze recognized the computerized tone of a voice disguiser. He slowly lifted his new bottle to his lips. "Depends."

The figure discretely slid a packet across the table. "For your time."

Katze ignored the packet. "You can't afford my time, and I am a busy man, so you have until I finish this bottle to say what you will, and then I'm gone."

"We understand you belong to a very prominent Blondie."

"You've been misinformed. I belong to no one."

"You are a Furniture, are you not?"

"I am a business man who *was* a Furniture."

"Do you still have contact with your former Master?"

Katze's fingers tightened on the bottle. "On occasion."

"What do you do for him?"

"Whatever he tells me." Katze glanced at his half-empty bottle and scowled bitterly. "He is an *Elite*, after all."

"Would you wish to be free of its rule? Its...interference?"

"That isn't possible." Katze stared into the bottle for a long moment and fingered the long scar on his face that Iason had given him. "I cannot disobey him."

"What if he were gone?"

Katze glanced up, surprise flickering across his face before he was able to mask it. "I don't deal in fantasy."

"It could be reality."

Katze lifted his gaze to the hooded figure, a flicker of hope sparked in them for a brief instant, and then he lowered his lashes to hide it. “There is no way.” He finished off his drink and set the empty bottle on the table as he rose. “We’re done here.”

The figure rose and a strong hand gripped Katze’s arm. “We can do it! You can be part of it. You would never have to obey the machine again.”

Katze shook the person’s hand off and stepped back. “Why are you saying that?” he demanded, as his eyes swept the room. “Are you working for him? Are you trying to trap me?”

“No! We work for another who wants the same as you.”

“You have no idea what I want!”

“Freedom.” A gloved hand reached out and touched Katze’s cheek. “Is that not what you desire?”

Katze gasped and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, there was fear. “How...how do you?”

“We have listened and heard your cry of despair. We can break the chains that bind you, Katze.”

Katze again glanced around, then grabbed the figure and strode over to a private room. He slapped his hand on the panel and the door slid open. Shoving the figure inside, he closed the door and quickly locked it. “Who are you?” he demanded ripping the hood off the stranger and finding a woman with long green hair and a disrupter mask over her face.

“We can help you,” the woman said removing her mask and allowing a musical, nearly seductive voice to emerge. “We can free you of the Blondie.”

Katze shook his head. “I...I can’t. I can’t ever be free. He would find me. He would...I can’t!”

She pulled off the cloak revealing a lush, curvaceous body, scantily clad in blue and white scarfs, placed in strategic places. "It will be gone, forever. You would be free of its bonds." She stepped closer to Katze, pressing her body against his enticingly. "Free to do whatever you like, whenever you like, with whomever you like."

"I...I...."

"Does that not sound worth a tiny bit of information?"

"I...Information?"

"Yes. We need only for someone to get one of us near it and our mutual problem will be solved."

"H...How? He's a Blondie. He's *the* Blondie."

The woman shoved her hands through Katze's hair and pulled him down so that their lips were almost touching, but not quite. "What is it you truly desire?" She licked at his lips and felt him shiver. "I can give you anything you want, for this one small favor, and you would be free."

"Free," Katze murmured as she kissed a path across his neck, then started unfastening the laces of his shirt. "What...what are you doing to me?"

"Whatever you want. Does your Master deny you the touch of another?"

"Yes."

"Does it deny your right to choose?"

Katze closed his eyes and dropped his head back as the woman licked and nipped at his bare chest. "Yes," he whispered as his hands slid around her.

"Your needs, your desires," she said, seductively. "You can have everything."

"Yes."

“Then you will help us?”

“Yes.”

“What is the bypass code for his condo?”

Katze wet his lips as the woman somehow maneuvered them so they were now on the bed and she was climbing over him. “You...you’d never get through,” he gasped as she sucked on his right nipple. “Too...too much security.”

“You know of another place where it might be alone?”

“Wil...will you really...really kill him?”

“We will remove it from your life forever.”

“Kil...kill Iason Mink...”

“Yes!” She reached eagerly for the front of his slacks. “Yes we will take care of everything, just tell us where....”

Katze caught her face between his hands and sat up, startling her by his suddenly clear and calm expression. “I apologize for misleading you, but that will get you nowhere.”

“W...what?” she began, even as a gloved finger tapped against the nape of her neck and she slumped forward, unconscious.

“That was an interesting show,” Raoul stated as he shoved the woman to the side so she sprawled across the bed. “She was obviously never informed that all Furniture are eunuchs.”

Katze stared at the woman and felt no sympathy whatsoever. “It worked in our favor, so what does it matter?” He started to rise and a gloved hand shoved him back down across the mattress again. “What the hell?”

“I was unaware a eunuch could show such lustful expressions.”

“What does that...” Katze began, then paused as a knee landed between his legs and Raoul leaned over him on the bed. “What are you doing?”

“Experimenting,” Raoul said as he ran a finger across Katze’s chest. “For the sake of science, you understand.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Katze tried to sit up again and found his wrists caught and pinned above his head by one of Raoul’s hands. “You have to question her and find out what the plan is!”

“I will have my answers within a few minutes,” Raoul assured as he leaned down and sniffed Katze. “No endorphin's, no sweat, and your nerves remained steady despite the show you put on for her.” He inhaled again. There was another scent here, something, enticing, but he could not contribute it to one of the chemical reactions of being Human. “You certainly had me convinced.”

“I’m not a flower bed!”

“Did you truly feel nothing during her seduction?”

“How would I feel anything?” Katze demanded. “You do know how boys become Furniture right? What the process entails?”

“I do, however she is a Pleen, a race known for their ability to increase the endorphin's in other races, they rule through sex.”

“I felt nothing.” Except for that single moment of panic that always came when someone touched him. “However, I have been educated in several sexual techniques and have attended countless pet parties, so it wasn’t that difficult to mimic a response.” He glared at Raoul. “Release my hands. Now.”

Raoul smirked. “Or you’ll attempt suicide again?”

Katze stared at him, because he had no response. He pulled at his hands, concerned when they didn’t budge from Raoul’s grip and again that familiar terror started to rise within him. He knew this was a completely different

situation. He knew the Blondie would not really do anything harmful to him, probably, and yet the fear was there.

“We’re wasting time.”

“You never answered my question from before.”

“What question?”

“Why did you chose to become a Furniture? Why chose castration when you could have kept your sexual organs had you become a pet?”

“No.”

Katze’s response was rapid and firm.

“Tell me why?” Raoul slid his hand inside Katze’s waistband and moved his fingers over the flat, smooth area. “Tell me of what you dreamed, and why it made you cry.”

Katze suddenly went limp and turned his head to the side. “No matter what you do I can’t feel anything. I can’t react, so why bother?”

“Do you truly feel nothing?”

“There *is* nothing to feel.” Stop touching me! Gods, please stop touching me!

Raoul caught Katze’s chin and turned the redhead’s face towards him, startled to see moisture in the usually cold, expressionless eyes. “You do feel something.”

“I feel frustrated that we are wasting time!”

“Science is never a waste of time.”

“I thought you wanted to save Iason?” Katze growled. “Experiment later!”

“Very well.” Raoul’s deep green eyes trapped Katze’s furious ones. “Since I now have your permission.” He released the black market dealer and rose.

“What?” Permission? What the hell was he talking about now? “I’m not giving you permission for any...” Katze was silenced by a gloved hand covering his mouth.

“Tsk. I am an Elite. You *must* obey me.” Raoul smirked, tossing Katze’s earlier words back at him as he tossed the unconscious woman over his shoulder. “We’ll experiment more later.”

Katze fastened his shirt and rose. “I wish you were the one they wanted to blow up,” he muttered as he Raoul stepped through a secret exit on the other side of the room. He knew the owner of this establishment well, and this room was specifically for the high-ranking officials that wished to come and go unseen.

He wiped his moist hands on his slacks and followed Raoul out of the room.

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Cal awoke a second time and almost immediately recalled what he had found out in the archives. He started to sit up and was startled to find himself secured to the bed. What in the name of Jupiter?

“Excuse me!” he called out to whatever medical associates might be working outside the room. “Excuse me, why am I bound? I have to leave!” When nothing but silence responded he knew that something was not right.

Glancing right and left, he realized that he was in a room with no window, an isolation room perhaps? He was still in the hospital; he could tell by the uniquely sterile smell that all such places held. Looking up he saw just a small square vent over his head. No other furniture in the room but the table on which he lay.



He closed his eyes and brought up the visual blue prints of the main health center. He located the main isolation wing, then the ventilation shafts above them. Slowly he created a diagram in his head based on the plans he had seen before of the quickest route leading out of the medical center. The door opened but he kept his eyes closed and his breathing even.

“He’s still asleep.” A voice grumbled, deep and unfamiliar.

“The sedative we gave him should be wearing off soon, and then you can ask your questions.” Another voice said, this one female.

“How soon? We are wasting time!”

“You stunned him quite hard, he still may not even remember what it was he found. There may be no reason to keep him...”

“We have to be sure. There can be no loose ends.”

“I understand. Have you still been unable to decrypt the pass code on his tablet?”

“No. For a simple Furniture, he seems excessively skilled in electronics. Which is why we must know what he knows now.”

“Well, until he wakes up he can’t tell you anything.”

“Then wake him up!”

“If I give him a stimulant on top of the sedative it will addle his brain further and your information will still not be gathered.”

“How much longer must I wait?”

“Another hour and he should be wide awake.”

“No. We cannot wait that long.”

“What do you plan to do then?”

“Prepare him for transport. We will take him with us.”

“As you wish.”

A door opened and closed and then Cal could feel someone removing his bindings. He willed himself to stay limp as he was carried a couple of feet, then placed in some sort of chair. Whoever was still with him adjusted his hands and feet so he would be more comfortable, then a soft finger touched his cheek.

“I am sorry about this,” the female sighed. “You are such a pretty thing.”

Cal remained unresponsive until he heard the door open and close again, then the click of a security lock. His eyes flew open and he bounded from the chair, then immediately fell to his knees as his head started to swim.

They had his tablet, but they would never decrypt it because Riki had secured it and only he and Riki knew the password. He wasn't sure who these people were or what they wanted that information for, but he had to get out of there and contact Riki and Master Mink.

Slowly rising, he shook his head clear then climbed onto the bed. Even with his new height he could not reach the vent, he was just a few inches short. Hopping down he grabbed the hover chair and maneuvered it until it sat atop the bed. It could not climb any higher for safety reasons, but it was enough that Cal could climb onto the chair and reach the grate.

The grate came off easily enough, but the vent was very narrow, he wasn't sure he would fit. Wishing he was as small as he once was rather pointless, and all he could do as try. Glancing towards the door, he jumped and managed to catch the edge of where the vertical shaft became horizontal. With a grunt, he pulled himself up and into the chute.

It was an almost unbearably tight fit, but at least it was cool inside the vent and he could use his extended hands and arms to pull himself through. There was no telling how long he had before they came back, and the evidence of where he had gone was obvious, so he just needed to get to

another room or area outside of the isolation section where he could drop down and make a run for it.

He had just come to a junction in the vent system when he heard the echo of voices shouting behind him and what sounded like someone else coming into the vents. Pushing himself forward faster, he spotted a grate and looked down through it. A wash area! Yes! He popped the grate out and had no choice but to go head first through it and hope that the fall didn't break his neck.

The drop came, just as he felt something or someone grab his foot from behind, but by then gravity had taken over, and he plunged through the vent over a stall and into the lap of a large, muscular man.

"I beg your pardon!" Cal offered as he tried to scramble off the startled man in medical blues.

"Where did you come from?" the Doctor asked, shocked, his arms tightening around Cal instead of releasing him, despite the intimacy of what the man was in the process of doing. "First I'm getting hit by grates and now pretty boys are dropping in my lap!"

Cal pointed up, just as a shadowed face appeared over the open vent. "I'm in a spot of trouble Sir. Would you be so kind as to release me so I can make my escape?"

"That kid is mine," a voice from the vent growled. "Give him to me."

"What will you give me for him?" the Doctor demanded, and when he received no answer, he looked at Cal. "What will *you* give me?"

"Anything I am able to give."

"A kiss?"

"If you wish, but if I do you will have to fend him off so I have time to escape."

The man grinned widely. "Sure!"

Cal yelped slightly as the man rose from his seat and lifted him as well, before stepping out of the stall. He carefully set Cal on his feet.

“Make it a good one and I’ll deal with this fella.”

Cal lifted his chin and pressed his lips to the larger man’s, allowing the stranger to slip his tongue inside for a few moments before pulling away at the sound of his assailant climbing out of the vent.

“That will do sweet thing. Off you go.” The Doctor gave Cal a gentle shove towards the doors, reached down to pull up his pants and then turned to face the second intruder.

“Do be careful! Thank you!” Cal called back as he bolted through the doors and into the hospital hallway. He tried not to think about how pleasant, if brief, his first ever kiss had been, as he spotted a sign that said G wing and immediately knew where he was.

“There you are!”

Cal turned at the familiar voice and saw Bean rushing towards him with a bag in his hand. Was Bean part of the conspiracy to keep him locked up? He couldn’t fathom it, because Furniture was loyal to their masters, but who else knew he was here?

Before he could make up his mind whether to stay or run, Bean had caught up to him.

“I came to bring you a change of clothes,” the younger Furniture said, lifting the bag. “And they said you had been moved to Isolation because you had some sort of airborne virus. Is that true? Are you Ill?”

Cal didn’t know if he could trust Bean or not, but again, before he could make a decision he spotted two orderlies rushing towards him. “I’m not sick and I have to get out of here. I know the way but...”

Bean glanced at approaching men and then back at Cal. “I have a cab waiting on Level 3 parking,” he said before he stuck his finger down his

throat, turned and rushed towards the men moaning. “Help, I feel sick!”

Cal bolted down the corridor as he heard Bean vomit, turned left, right and right again as his brain replayed the map of the building. He burst into the underground parking and hurried towards the third level. There was no time to decide if this was a trap as he spotted the cab and dove inside.

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“Do you have an appointment?”

Carrie tried not to growl at the droid that was blocking her path to Iason Mink’s building. “I’ve already told you that I don’t, but this is important and I need to speak with Master Mink.”

“You may not enter without an appointment.”

“Fine. Can I make an appointment?”

“You will need to speak with his personal assistant for that.”

“Do you have his assistant’s contact code?”

“It is forbidden to release personal codes to those who are not authorized.”

“Then how can I make an appointment, you idiotic piece of tin?”

“You may make your request for contact at the Ministry of Services.”

“I don’t have time for that!”

The droid simply stared at her and she realized that she wasn’t going to get past it, because she had gone through a similar situation when she had tried to give Iason the broach that Riki had earned. She thought about the photo in her pocket and bit her lip.

She spotted a pair of Elite's heading towards them and hurried over to them. "Excuse, me, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm trying to find Master Mink. I have something for him and it is very important, but the droid won't let me inside and..."

"Iason is not at home," the Blondie with turquoise eyes offered. "He is at a pet party in the Bally District."

"Yes," agreed the second Blondie. "We just came from there. Is there anything we can help you with?"

"Oh! Oh, no thank you. It's better if I give it to him directly. "Could you tell me the name of the venue where he is?"

"Serenity," the first Blondie replied. "Across from the Golden Palace Casino."

"Thank you so much for your help!" she called and hurried around them. She waved her vendor's pass at the gates of Eos and was permitted through, and hurried to a cabstand. Quickly stating her destination, the automated vehicle pulled away from its perch and headed through the streets of Tanagura.

Slipping her hand into her pocket and stared at the photo of Riki. She could not imagine why any of the vendors would have a photo of him, but it was too suspicious that the griller had packed up and left so quickly. It could be nothing, but she had noticed a handful of new vendors during the festival that had not been there in previous years. That in itself wasn't unusual, as some off world races came specifically for Junpein, but what was odd was that three or four of the new vendors did not seem as eager in selling their wares, as you would expect them to be.

The festival only came once a year, so anyone that managed to get a clearance code to sell during it were always manically working to get as much money as they could during those three days. She had noticed the griller, a man selling scarfs and another woman who had been hocking electronics made a few sales, but didn't have any callers for their signs or sale signs posted.

Her eyes strayed to the photo in her hand again. What did it all mean?

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Riki sat at Iason's feet, leaned back against the wide chair as the Blondie idly played with his hair, and shifted his legs from their bent position to where he could brace his arms against them. His ass had gone to sleep from sitting on the floor for so long, but he'd promised to behave. Iason had rejected most of the invitations he had received for the festival, stating he was too busy, but he'd had to make appearances at a few places and had asked Riki to come with him.

Riki hadn't been thrilled with the idea, he'd hoped they could just enjoy the festival on their own, but Iason was *the* Blondie, and socializing was also part of his duties; especially now that he had been designated as Jupiter's Voice among them. At least the occasion was just dinner, not a pet party, and Iason had promised they would spend the rest of the evening alone.

Iason had intended for Riki to sit beside him, but the Blondie he was having dinner with had brought along his own pet and the boy sat on the floor beside his Master, as was expected. He was startled when Riki made the decision to do the same, and was surprised by the twinge of distaste Riki's submissiveness left in his mouth. He had grown used to eating with Riki beside him, not on the floor. Still, he was proud of Riki for not making a scene.

The other Blondie, Guntor was his name, fed his pet from his own plate, also more than acceptable when in such an establishment, but he noticed Riki cringe each time Guntor's pet obediently opened his mouth. Not wishing to upset Riki, he requested a small plate of finger foods that Riki could eat on his own, and then instantly began to analyze when he had become concerned about such things? Perhaps their relationship really was changing. He was still considering Riki's actions earlier and his insistence on releasing the lizard into the wild. Riki's reasoning was still beyond him, but he was working on finding a conclusion.

Riki was being very calm and polite, so much so that Iason kept looking down to make sure that it was still *his* Riki sitting beside him. To reward

Riki, he suggested his lover that read his book, knowing that Riki always had a book in the pocket of his jacket. When Guntor made a smart-ass comment about allowing a pet to be distracted, Iason explained it was for Riki's education and that as a pet, he would hardly be interested in their political discussion.

Iason was unusually eager for the evening to be over. He wanted to take Riki back to their home and thoroughly ravage him, and afterwards they would sit and eat chocolate cake and ice cream, as a treat for Riki's exemplary behavior. Then tomorrow he would give Riki his gift. He had a slight tickle in his brain at the idea, and wondered if this was what excitement felt like? He hoped so. He wanted to be excited, he wanted Riki to be excited for his gift and understand what it meant for both of them.

Riki closed his book and slid it into his pocket, then tried not to sigh too loudly. He was bored out of his mind, and Iason had even stopped petting him, because he was so deep in discussion with the other Blondie.

The other pet sat obediently by his Master, barely moving except when Guntor moved, or to accept one of the Blondie's handouts. Riki honestly didn't understand how someone could have so little pride. Couldn't fathom that sort of unbreakable obedience. It had taken Iason a while to train him, and yes he was obedient to Iason most of the time, but not to that extent. Never to that extent.

"Iason. Guntor."

Riki looked up at as a Platinum Elite stopped by their circular booth, and as the Blondies greeted him, Riki's eyes rose to the pet at the man's side.

"Kirie."

Iason glanced down from where he had been greeting the Platinum. "Did you say something, Riki?" He asked and noticed the pet beside the Platinum. "I see."

Riki bolted to his feet as rage engulfed him. "Kirie!"



The youngest member of Bisson turned to face Riki without even a hint of recognition, his eyes devoid of emotion. He wore the standard, barely-there leather pet clothing that exposed most of his pale flesh, and seemed not even remotely ashamed of it.

“Our pets seem to know each other, Iason,” the Platinum commented.

“Pet?” Pet! Riki turned to Iason, confused.

“Yes, it would seem so, Paldin.”

It would seem so? Riki couldn't believe that Iason was just shrugging this off, but then Iason's eyes narrowed on him, as if warning him not to make a scene. He looked back at Kirie who didn't seem like Kirie at all! How could this be the same headstrong kid, who had pestered him at every turn, trying to prove himself?

Had they....had they wiped his mind?

“I believe we should be going,” Iason said as he caught Riki's wrist in a firm grip. “I will let you know my decision on what we discussed at a later date, Guntor.”

“Certainly, Iason.”

Iason hauled Riki out of the restaurant faster than he could blink, but the moment they were outside, Riki started to struggle.

“You son of a bitch! You rotten, unimaginable bastard!”

“Stop!” Iason ordered, as the car was brought around and he practically shoved Riki inside, before climbing behind the wheel. “Why are you so upset? He was nothing to you. He betrayed you.”

“He was a kid! He was just a fucking kid! How could you do that too him! I came back to you. You said if I came back you that you would leave Bisson alone.”

“I *did* leave them alone.”

“Kirie was part of Bisson! He was part of my gang!”

“He betrayed you for money and a few material goods, Riki. He betrayed Bisson as well by willingly walking them into a trap.” Iason reached for him.

“Don’t you fucking touch me!”

“Stop this!” Iason caught Riki’s fist as it headed for his face and easily pinned the mongrel against the passenger side door. “How can you feel anything but anger towards him?”

“You...you don’t understand.” Riki pulled and pulled until Iason released him, and the moment he did, Riki turned away, hunched in the seat and held his head as if he were about to be sick. “Even if I hated him, even if I was angry with him, I’d never want...He was just a *kid*.”

“He understood what he was doing...”

“No!” Riki turned on him. “He did it for money, to make himself feel worth something. He did it because he thought it would be a better life than in Ceres, that people would stop looking down at him.” He thought about the evening before he had left the slums to return to Iason.

Kirie had been hiding in his apartment and had begged Riki to continue hiding him. The Midas squad were looking for him, he and Guy and the others had gotten the shit knocked out of them because of Kirie, and then the kid had the gall to show up at his apartment and beg for help.

Riki had never learned what Kirie had done to have everyone after him, but when Katze had shown up and threatened to use truth serum on him, he’d had to give the kid up. He’d had no choice, even though Guy had been pissed enough to hit him over it. Guy didn’t know Katze like he did, he didn’t know that Katze would do whatever Iason told him to do, whatever it took.

Putting his and Guy’s life on the line for a kid he hated, a kid who had somehow gotten so badly fucked up that he had refused to come out of

Riki's closet for four days. Beatings, imprisonment or even death, these were things Riki knew Kirie might be subjected to when he'd allowed Katze to take the kid without a fight, but he had never imagined that the small slum mongrel would become a mindless sex doll to an Elite.

"He couldn't expect this! You tricked him. You and your kind fucking tricked him just like you tricked me!"

Iason felt as if Riki had dealt him a physical blow. "Riki..." He began, alarmed that Riki would still be thinking that way. "We are different. We..."

"Change him back!"

"That is not possible."

"Then we're done." Riki stated coldly. "You wanted a pet, so you have one, but that's all I am to you now, a fucking doll for you to play with when you're in the mood."

"No..."

Riki turned cold dark eyes towards Iason. "*You* did this. This is what happens when you fuck with people's lives as if they are puppets." Riki turned away as his lower lip started to tremble and he wrapped his arms around himself. "I trusted you."

Iason's eyes flashed red, and then quickly went back to blue as he sighed. "We will deal with this at home," he said as he pulled away from the restaurant, just as it started to rain.

"Fuck you."

Iason slammed on the breaks as Riki threw open the passenger side door, hit the pavement in a roll and took off running.

How could he do that? Why would he do that? Riki felt moisture on his face and refused to admit that it was more than just rain on his skin. He'd given everything up to go back to Iason. He'd agreed to his terms, but Iason had

stacked the deck against him, had forced his hand. He'd thought everyone would be safe once he was back in Eos, back in Iason's grip.

He ran as if the demons of hell were after him, because Iason was a demon. Iason was the devil himself. What if Iason got tired of him and wiped his mind? What if he just got pissed one day and decided he was tired of putting up with Riki's shit? Slum mongrels were nothing to a Blondie, and seeing Kirie proved that. How could he trust Iason after this?

Iason called his name but Riki refused to turn back. He knew that he couldn't out run the Android, but when Iason still had not caught up to him, something caused him to stumble and look back. He saw Iason face up on the ground and immobile.

"W...what?" he began, taking a step towards the Blondie then hesitating because it could be a trap. What did he care if Iason had fallen over? He was mad at him, damn it! But when a car pulled up and three men got out with some sort of weapons, Riki found himself running back towards his lover.

"No, Riki," Iason said in a voice that didn't sound like him at all.

"Hey!" Riki growled as he saw the men reaching down to pick Iason up. "HEY! Get the fuck away from him!"

The men turned and appeared stunned immobile for a moment, before two of the others started moving faster while one of them lifted his hands peaceably and started walking towards Riki.

"He's hurt. We're just going to...Uuuufff!"

Riki's fist landed in the man's face, knocking him cold, and pushing past him without breaking stride. "I said get your fucking hands off him!" He leapt at the man trying to lift Iason's arms and delivered a flying kick to the assailant's face.

"Stop," Iason said, again in a dulled, quiet voice. "Get. Away. Riki."

“What’s wrong with you?” Rik demanded as the third man came at him. This guy wasn’t going to be surprised or sucker punched, and Riki had his hands full dodging the man’s fists and feet.

“Can’t...move. Some kind. Of force shield. Interfere with my...systems.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Riki’s distraction with Iason caused his attacker to land a solid blow to Riki’s jaw, which just pissed the mongrel off even more. He kicked the man in the groin, he was a street fighter after all, then chopped his hand across the man’s neck as he lowered in pain.

“Maku, please stop. We do not wish to hurt you...”

“Who the fuck is Maku?” Was this all some sort of mistaken identity? Did they think he was someone else? He slammed his head back to catch the man sneaking up behind him in the face, delivered an elbow to the man’s solar plexus and spun around in time to drop a hard punch to his head as the man doubled over.

“Ri...ki. Go...away.”

Riki knelt beside Iason and tried to lift him, but the android was too heavy. “Shut up. Where’s your communicator?” He reached for Iason’s wrist unit but whatever they had hit the Blondie with had fried the circuits. “How... how do I do this? How do I fix you?”

“Never...felt...before. Unclear...solution.”

“Do you have like an on off switch or something? Can I reboot you?”

Iason’s lips twitched. “No.”

“Well tell me what to fucking do?” Riki cried, then spotted another two cars coming towards them. “Fuck. Fuck!” He slid his arms under Iason’s shoulders, managed to lift him a couple of inches, but no more. There was no possible way he could move Iason and get him out of here.

“Ri..ki.”

“Will you shut up? I’m trying to think!” He spotted one of the weapons that the men had dropped before Riki had immobilized him and grabbed it, just a standard laser rifle, so obviously not the weapon that immobilized Iason.

“For...give...me.”

“This is not the time!”

“Riki...please....run.”

The cars came to a stop and several more men in hoods exited. Riki rose and prepared himself to fend them off. Once again Riki managed to down two of them before they even realized what was happening, but by then the ones he had knocked out earlier were coming to their senses.

“Don’t hurt him!” The first man he had hit on his way into the fray cried as he slowly climbed to his feet.

“Hurt *him*?” An assailant managed to squeak before a fist landed in his face and he found himself on his ass for the second time. “He’s mangling us!”

“Stop!”

Riki turned and saw one of the men pointing a foreign looking device at Iason’s head. “This emits an Electromagnetic Pulse, on its lowest setting it has merely incapacitated the android, on the highest...” The man deliberately showed Riki as he adjusted the power level and the device hummed with a strange white light. “It destroy the all computerized systems.”

Iason grunted. “Run.... Riki.”

“If you run I will kill it.”

Riki slowly lowered his arms and was immediately caught between two of the men. “What do you want?”

“We need you to come with us, quietly.”

“Why?”

“Our employer wishes to meet you.”

“Who is your employer?”

“I cannot tell you that.”

“Then I’m not going.”

“You would rather watch me fry all organic and electronic mater in your Master?”

“He’s not my Master,” Riki began and when the man moved the device to within an inch of Iason’s skull he recanted. “Stop!”

“You will come with us?”

“Y...yes.”

“Riki. No.”

“Just...shut up, Iason.” He was upset and angry with Iason, but he didn’t want him dead. “Everything has been leading up to this, so let’s just get it over with.” He sneered at the men beside him. “Well, what the fuck are you standing around for? Take me to your leader, assholes.”

Iason’s eyes were flashing between blue, red and completely white as he tried to fight through whatever force was holding him immobile. His limbs would not respond to his commands. His brain was sluggish, and he could not contact anyone. He could not allow them to just take Riki.

*Jupiter! Help me! They are taking Riki!*

*I cannot exist without him. Jupiter, please!*

Iason watched helplessly as the men escorted Riki towards one of the cars, and then suddenly a loud, strange sounding roar fell across the air.

Riki turned his head at the sound, as did the others, and a second later, he noticed the weight of the men holding him was gone. He stumbled backwards as he looked down and saw the two hooded assailants lying face down on the ground, the back of their jackets shredded in four long strikes and bright red blood pooling out of the deep gashes.

Hearing a low growl, he spun around and saw a blur of gold and black attacking two more men with similar ferocity, then the creature leapt onto the shoulders of the man who was still pointing a weapon at Iason, wrapped what looked like legs around the man's neck and twisted viciously so the man dropped with the others.

When the creature suddenly landed in front of Riki, fear spiked in him and he reached for a weapon, only to have it knocked out of his hand as a tawny, clawed hand caught his chin and hissed at him. His eyes widened in both fascination and fear.

The creature had an almost Human face, if you didn't count the slightly protruding nose, sharp jagged teeth, pointed ears and long whiskers. A long mane of black started at the crown of the creature's head and flowed in a thick, wild curtain down its shoulders and over its back. Her back, he realized as he glanced down at the pair of large naked breasts that protruded from the front of the creature's body. Her skin was the color of melted gold, accented with black slashing marks over her arms legs and face in some sort of intricate pattern.

"Not nice."

Riki's head shot up at the voice and was shocked at the familiar set of eyes that stared back at him. "W...what?" he began, but the creature turned suddenly, hissed again and stretched long, lean legs sideways as clawed hands lifted in defense. Something brushed at his thighs and he glanced down at the long tail that extended from just above the crease of the creature's buttocks. "Y...you've got a t...tail!"

A blast of blue came towards them as one of the men fired their stun rifles and Riki found himself thrown to the ground as the lioness in human form pounced and quickly disarmed their attacker. Riki grabbed for a discarded



rifle again and fired back at the men firing at the creature, but then he saw one of the blue blasts hit her in the back.

The creature flinched, then turned and dove at the man who had fired, just as two more blasts hit her. Riki surged to his feet as he watched her crumple to the ground beside Iason.

“Carrie!” he cried, just as he felt the familiar tingling of a stun bolt at his own back. He reached for the people he cared about, darkness claimed him.

## Chapter 19

### Summary for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who commented and I apologize to those who are upset it was a bit of a cliff hanger, so I am warning you now this chapter ends in a small one too...However, I plan to upload the very next chapter in just a few days, so you won't have to wait as long, assuming my internet cooperates as it has been going in and out on me all week.

The scene with Guy and Shiao doesn't really match the intensity of the rest of the story, but I had that Bruno Mars song running around in my head for two weeks and I HAD to put it somewhere. I hope you like it anyway.

Ahh well, enough ranting...read on!

Cal burst through the condo doors and called out for Iason and Riki. He knew it was against protocol, but this was no time to be worrying about such things. After searching the entire apartment and finding it empty, he hurried back into the plaza of Eos. He had tried to contact both Iason and Riki on their links and there had been no answer. He had already confirmed that Iason was not at work, so where else could they be?

After asking around, he found out about the pet party and went there, but learned they had already left. That left the market place, where he hoped Carrie or one of the vendors had seen them. Perhaps they were just enjoying the festival and nothing was wrong, but he couldn't assume that. He headed back towards the main hub of Eos and spotted Katze and Raoul coming out of one of the main buildings.

"Katze!" he hurried up to them. "Have you seen Master Iason or Riki? I can't find them anywhere."

"What do you mean you can't find them?" Katze demanded. "Have you tried contacting them by link?"

“Yes, of course! They are not answering. I learned they had been attending a pet party, but left there some time ago. I thought they might be enjoying the festival, but they are not in the marketplace either!”

“They couldn’t have hit them already,” Katze stated. “They needed my help to get close to Iason. The girl confirmed they’d only had minor back up plans in place and I can’t see any of them working.”

“No,” Raoul agreed. “Something must have happened, something that gave them an opening.” He looked at Cal. “When was the last time they were seen?”

“A little over an hour ago, Sir, and it appears Miss. Carrie has also gone missing.”

“Who is Miss Carrie?”

“A vendor friend of Riki’s. One of the other dealers said that she had said something about needing to see Master Iason and had left her stall almost two hours ago, but never returned, and...” Cal deliberated whether the incident at the hospital was important. He was just a furniture...or rather a tutor. Perhaps it had been a misunderstanding?

“And what?” Katze prompted.

“Well...it may not have any relevance to the current situation but...”

“Just spit out for Jupiter’s sake!” Raoul snapped.

Cal flinched. “Well...it’s only that...someone attempted to keep me hostage at the hospital.”

“What?” Katze gripped Cal’s arms. “Why were you at the hospital? Are you all right? Were you hurt?”

Both Cal and Raoul were surprised by Katze’s unusual show of concern.

“I...I am fine. I escaped, but I heard them say they wanted information from me.”

“What sort of information?”

“Why didn’t you say that at the start?”

As both men had responded simultaneously, Cal was uncertain whom to answer first. He picked Raoul since he was an Elite and it was in his training to do so. “I can’t be sure exactly what they wanted, Sir, but I was in the archives researching...” He paused. Katze knew about Riki’s search for his origin but he was unsure if Raoul did, and it was not his place to tell him so. “Um...a special project that I was working on and I think it may have been that.”

“What special project?”

“Did you find out anything?”

This time, it was Katze Cal answered. “I did, I believe I may have found proof of his...a...resolution, but it was in my tablet and they took it.”

“Who took it?” Raoul demanded, annoyed.

“The people who were keeping me hostage.”

“Who else knows about what you found?” Katze asked, quickly.

“No one, not even Master Iason or Riki. I was going to tell them when... when...” Cal tried to think back to what had happened. Bean had said he’d been found unconscious on the floor. “I’m not sure what happened, really. I woke up in the hospital. Bean was there, but then he left, and I fell asleep again and when I woke these people were there talking about taking me somewhere and questioning me to unlock my tablet.”

Cal’s eyes widened as he was suddenly lifted off his feet by the front of his jacket.

“If one of you do not tell me what is going on, I shall break you *both* in half!” Raoul growled, menacingly.

“Hey! Drop him!” Katze ordered, trying to pry Raoul’s hands off of Cal’s shirt.

“Master Raoul!”

All three turned toward the newcomer, well, except for Cal who just turned his head and dangled, as a pale, scantily clad boy with silver hair rushed towards them. The pet stopped so suddenly at the sight of the other two that he lost his balance and fell on his ass. He scrambled to his knees and bowed his head.

“F...Forgive me, Master’s. I...I did not m...mean to intrude.”

Raoul slowly lowered Cal back to the ground and stared coldly down at the shaking child and the multiple bruises that shadowed the near-white skin. “Why are you injured?”

Anjell glanced up at Raoul, and then quickly down again. “I...I am fine. I am serving my Master.”

“Who is your Master?” Katze asked.

“Rodin the Ruby.”

Raoul lifted an eyebrow. “Are you here on behalf of your Master then?”

Anjell bit his lip. He *was* here because of his Master, but it was to betray him. Now, however, he was scared to death of what would happen if he spoke against his Master. “I... will be destroyed,” he murmured as the reality of his task suddenly hit him, and then, just as quickly, realized that death would be preferable to spending another night as a pet. “Yes, I...I will be destroyed, but it matters not.”

“No one will harm you.” Raoul crouched and caught Anjell’s chin, lifted the boy’s face, only to see tears streaming down from beautiful amethyst eyes. “Tell me.”

“M...my Master. I overheard him and another discussing...they said...” Would a Blondie even believe him? He was just a pet, after all, still, if he

kept quiet and Riki was hurt... “They are plotting to do something to Riki so that Master Iason will become distraught and they can take over his position.”

Raoul scowled. “That is a serious charge pet.”

“Yes.”

“What is your proof of this charge?”

Anjell took a deep breath and told Raoul word for word the conversation he had overheard Rodin and Parasysl having. Then he closed his eyes and waited to die.

“Ah...so I see.”

“Son of a bitch!” Katze growled. “Those traitorous sons of bitches!”

Anjell carefully opened his eyes and looked up at them. “You...you believe me?”

“Yes. I have suspected them for some time of plotting something, but I had not believed they were stupid enough to follow through.”

“Does that mean you know where Riki and Iason are?” Katze asked.

“No,” Raoul sighed. “It means things just became much more complicated. The Pleen that came to enlist your help is unusual. I have never heard tell of anyone of her race ever visiting Amoï., which means that she was sent by someone off world. Rudin and Parasysl seemed to be under the impression that Riki would no longer be an issue after tonight, or that they would ever be found out.”

“Which means they knew Riki would be taken off world and that Iason probably would not be able to find him again once he was.” Katze knew how angry and distressed that would make Iason, having seen the Blondie when Riki was taken by Guy. Taking the mongrel off world would probably cause Iason to abandon everything here to find his pet, thus allowing other Elites to take over in his stead.

“But why would anyone want to take Riki?” Anjell asked, still knelling on the ground, then quickly lowered when Raoul glanced down at him.

“Indeed,” Raoul concurred. “He is just a mongrel. He holds no power or tradeable skills, he can’t even manage to be a proper pet. He has not been in any serious trouble while Iason since they returned, so who could be after him?”

“I think I know,” Cal said, quietly and everyone turned to him. “I don’t think these people want to harm Riki. I think they only mean to take him home.”

Katze stepped closer to Cal. “You found out where he’s from?”

The boy nodded. “I believe so, at least the possibility of it.”

“What do you mean where he is from?” Raoul demanded. “I insist you tell me what that means!”

“We recently found out that Riki is not from Amoï, but was dropped here as a child,” Katze explained. “He didn’t even know about it himself until recently, but he has been having memories, flashbacks, and so Cal and I were trying to figure out where exactly he was from.”

“You mean he is *not* a mongrel from Ceres? What is he then?”

Cal took a deep breath. “I think...I think Master Riki is Royalty.”

All three stared at him in shock.

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Guy and Shiao stepped through the interior arrival doors at the main Interport on Midas.

“So...where to now?” Guy asked as they headed through the lounge.

“I’m calling my contact no...” Shiao began then suddenly stopped walking and stumbled against the mongrel next to him as a voice sounded in his head.

*Hurry. There is no time.*

Had he been capable, Shiao would have wept at that moment, for the sound of his Creator’s voice after centuries of silence was like the sweetest ambrosia, mixed with the most exquisite pain. “Jupiter,” he whispered, awed.

*Platform twelve. There is a ship departing. They have Iason and the boy. You must hurry.*

“Shaio!” Guy cried as the Onyx fell to his knees. “What is it? What’s happening? I knew it! We shouldn’t have come back here. She’s hurting you!”

“N...no,” Shiao managed and tried to remember how to speak telepathically, to reach for the link that was offered, but the knowledge was lost and again he nearly wept. “What ship?” he said aloud.

*It is called Excalibur. Large and grey with black and gold wings. Go now!*

Shiao straightened and grabbed Guy’s hand.

“What’s happening? Where are we going?”

“To save your friend, I hope.”

“What?”

Guy kept pace beside the Onyx, not an easy feat considering the speed Shiao was running at, however the vice grip he had on Guy’s wrist gave the mongrel little choice but to keep up or risk injury. They darted around other people in the terminal, through one portal, across and into another, and finally a third.

“Where are we going?”



“To catch a ship.” Shiao stated as they broke into the open air of a landing platform and headed for a massive ship that already had thrusters running.

“We’re too late!”

“No. We are not,” Shiao stated as he suddenly tossed Guy over his shoulders and increased his speed.

Guy wasn’t sure what was happening, but the roar of the ship’s engines as they drew closer drowned out any more questions, and then they were suddenly airborne and Guy was watching the tarmac of the platform falling away.

Shiao grabbed onto the bottom of one of the landing gears as it started to fold upwards to the underside compartment and a moment later they were in the belly of the ship and darkness surrounded them.

“W...what’s happening?” Guy cried in the darkness. They were on a ship! A ship that was taking off and from where they were the noise of the engines were deafening. “Where are we going?”

“I do not know, but Jupiter wished for us to be on this ship.”

“How do you know it isn’t a trap? That she’s doing this to punish you?”

“There are far easier methods,” he assured as he released Guy and stood up.

A blue glow suddenly shot out from Shiao’s eyes, allowing them to see the compartment where they were trapped. The landing talons and clamps had folded up and were taking up the majority of the space, but Shiao’s eyes spotted a ladder and maintenance hatch above them. He climbed up and tried it, but it was locked.

“Can’t you just rip it off?” Guy demanded, trying not to show his fear as a strange pressure started in his ears.

“I could, but we do not know where it leads and may result in our capture or death, if we come upon the crew so suddenly. It would be better to wait

until we get to our destination and then try to slip out unseen. We can find your friend then.”

“He might not even....Aaaahhhh!”

Shiao dropped down from the hatch and crouched next to Guy. “What’s wrong? Were you injured when I jumped?”

Guy shook his head and that made the pressure and ringing worse. “My... my ears. Ahhh...it...it hurts.” He was going to be sick, his stomach suddenly revolted as if someone had punched him with a mechanical fist. “W...what is this?” It never felt like this on the ships he took with Shiao.

“They don’t have internal dampeners,” Shiao stated as he sat back down and wrapped his arms around Guy. “It will pass once we clear the atmosphere.”

Guy groaned and was humiliated by the fact that he was clinging to the Onyx. “This...sucks!”

“Yes, I am sure that it does.” Shiao gently rocked Guy, soothed his hair and offered what comfort he could. “It should only be another minute.”

Shiao was right, less than a minute later the pressure in his head faded, but his stomach was still clenching, although he had a feeling it was more than just space sickness. “What will we do when the ship lands?”

“We will find your friend.” And Iason Mink, Shiao finished silently, regretting that he had to omit that part and essentially lie to Guy. Hopefully he would be forgiven, as long as Riki could be saved.

“Why would anyone want to take Riki off planet?”

“I’ve no idea, but they have.”

“Or so Jupiter says.”

Shiao ignored the derisive snort from Guy. “Yes, so Jupiter says, and she has no reason to lie to me, Guy.”

“She could be lying because she’s holding a grudge, or maybe she’s just nuts.”

Shiao smirked. “Hush now. The trip may be long, why don’t you sleep and then you won’t feel it as much?”

“I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to.”

He was afraid, and unwilling to admit it. Huddled in a strange ship going who knew where. Yes, he wanted to help Riki, but this was a serious situation. Even if they managed to rescue Riki, how would they get back home? What kind of planet were they even going to? Would they be able to breathe the atmosphere, or walk or speak? What if the planet was just a big ball of gas, and when they slipped out of the compartment, they were vaporized?

“Shall I sing you a lullaby then?” Shiao teased and could feel the change in Guy’s temperature as he blushed.

“Fuck off. What am I three?”

“Have you never had anyone sing to you, Guy?”

Guy grew up in Guardian, and one thing they never did was coddle children. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Jupiter used to sing us to sleep.”

Guy glanced up and watched as the blue light streaming from Shiao’s eyes faded so he could look down at Guy without blinding him. “Seriously?”

“Yes. When we were being created, our consciousness was ready before our bodies were built, which was a unique and sometimes frightening experience. In order to get us to stabilize and settle down Jupiter would hum this music and it immediately calmed us.

“So...she was kinda like a mother?”

“In a way, yes.”

“I’ve never had a mother.”

“I know.”

Guy lowered his gaze. “Is that how you think of Jupiter? As a mother?”

“No. I think of Jupiter as my Creator, both terrible and Divine.”

“So...you love her, but...you also fear her?”

Shiao considered the question. “I am unsure if either word applies, as my emotions are not the same as a Human’s. I accept that she created my life, just as I accept that she has the ability and rights to extinguish it. It is more an understanding of fact than an emotional response.”

“She has no right to kill you. Don’t think like that. You’re a living being; you have the right to survive as much as anyone else does.”

Shiao paused over Guy’s words and wondered if the mongrel would apply them to Iason Mink, probably not. Still, it stirred something inside of him to have such a champion in his corner. He pulled Guy back against his chest.

“You are becoming cranky. You should sleep.”

“Shut up.” Guy liked the feel of being pressed against the Onyx. There was no subtle thumping of a heartbeat, but Shiao was warm and firm, not at all hard like you would expect an android body to be. “I thought you were gonna sing?”

Shiao smiled. “What sort of song would you like?”

Guy shrugged. “How the hell should I know?” Riki used to listen to New Earth tunes and the bars they went to always played eclectic instrumentals, but he was never that interested in music. “Pick something. Nothing childish, or mushy.”

“Mushy?”

“Yeah, like...” Guy paused as he considered how to explain the term.  
“Nothing...you know, embarrassing.”

“Ah. Very well.” Shiao, who was a fan of all types of music, searched his database for an appropriate song. He smiled as he found one, and clicked on his mini sound wave, so that a steady, peppy beat quietly surrounded them.

*If you ever find yourself stuck in the middle of the sea,*  
I'll sail the world to find you  
If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can't see,  
I'll be the light to guide you

*Find out what we're made of*  
When we are called to help our friends in need

Guy sat up and stared at Shiao in shock, both by the fact that the Onyx was making music come from his body, but also the incredibly sweet tenor of Shiao's voice as he sang.

You can count on me like one two three  
I'll be there  
And I know when I need it I can count on you like four three two  
You'll be there  
'Cause that's what friends are supposed to do, oh yeah

Guy started to smile and curled back into Shiao's chest, thrilled when the Onyx slid strong arms around him. A strange sensation started to grow in his chest, replacing the illness in his stomach. The roaring of the engines had dimmed, so that while it was certainly not quiet, the intensity of it no longer throbbed through his body like a jackhammer, and he could hear Shiao's voice much clearer.

If you tossin' and you're turnin' and you just can't fall asleep  
I'll sing a song  
Beside you  
And if you ever forget how much you really mean to me  
Every day I will

Remind you

Guy's eyes slowly started to close, despite the upbeat tune, and the fear in his heart lessened. What was this feeling that was surrounded him? Security? Peace? Happiness? It couldn't be love because it felt nothing like what he had felt for Riki. So what was it then?

Ooh

Find out what we're made of

When we are called to help our friends in need

You can count on me like one two three

I'll be there

And I know when I need it I can count on you like four three two

You'll be there

'Cause that's what friends are supposed to do, oh yeah

Shiao started to smile as he watched Guy's eyes close and the mongrel's body grow slack with sleep, pleased with his choice of song, for it truly explained how he felt about the mongrel. Resting his head against Guy's, he continued to sing.

*You'll always have my shoulder when you cry*

I'll never let go

Never say goodbye

You know you can

You can count on me like one two three

I'll be there

And I know when I need it I can count on you like four three two

And you'll be there

'Cause that's what friends are supposed to do, oh yeah

Oh, oh  
You can count on me 'cause I can count on you

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Carrie came too very slowly, and to the sound of her name being called. Even before her eyes opened, her body cried out in protest and pain.

“Carrie. I insist you wake up now.”

Reluctantly her lids lifted and she stared into the face of Iason Mink. “H... hey.”

She realized that Iason was not beside her, but against the opposite wall, held there by heavy bands against his wrists and ankles. Her eyes rose to the vision of stark grey walls and a windowless room. The only light came from an ancient looking grate over a hole in the ceiling about fifteen feet above them.

“Where...are we?”

“I’ve been unable to ascertain that as yet. Are you all right?”

Carrie groaned as she carefully sat up from the unforgiving floor and heard a strange clanking sound. “Huh?” A manacle was attached to her left foot, which stretched out from a heavy chain that was imbedded in the wall. She pulled at the chain and it allowed her to move less than a foot away from the wall. “Huh.”

“Carrie.”

She glanced up at Iason. “Yes?”

“Are you a Dakfure?”

Carrie blinked, then suddenly recalled what happened. She glanced down at her body and flushed, not because she was naked, but because someone had seen her in her true form. “How do you know what that is?”

“I have read about other cultures extensively. The Dakfure were said to be extinct over a century ago.”

“Yeah. Well, don’t believe everything you read.” She looked around them and realized that the room they were in was little more than an enclosed pit and that there were some previous prisoners still lying around. “Anyway, we may as well be. As far as I know, I’m the last.”

“That is regretful.”

“Mmmm...” She stretched out as far as the chain would allow her and reached for a white pile of rat bones in the far corner. Selecting one of the smaller fragments, she sat up again. “I’m half human, so that side of me usually only comes out when me or my own are threatened.”

Iason tilted his head, intrigued, as he watched one nail on her thumb grow much longer than the rest, then she started to file the rat bone with it. “Your own?”

“Yes, my Pride.” She glanced up. “Means my family.”

“As it was Riki you protected, am I to assume that you feel he belongs to you?”

“Don’t get your circuits in a twist. I know Riki belongs to you.” Again, she met his gaze. “And *you* belong to him. He’s a good kid, and he made me feel...less lonely these last few months. Of course I would protect him.”

“I am grateful for your protection, as I was unable to help him.” And Jupiter had done nothing to ease his pain. She had not even bothered to acknowledge his need at the time.

Carrie shrugged and held up the bone, which now had one end sharpened to a point. Carefully she started to work on the manacle. “Didn’t help much



since we ended up here anyway.”

“Yes, but had you not intervened they would have taken Riki off planet, and I might have never found him again. I can only assume that wherever we are now, so is Riki, and for that I am grateful.” He blinked in surprise as the manacle on Carrie’s foot suddenly snapped open and fell away. “Impressive.”

“Thanks.” She rose stretched and then walked over to him to study his bindings. “No locks, so I can’t pick it. They must be electronic.”

“They are, and they are generating an electro-magnetic pulse which keeps me from breaking free.”

“Is that why you’re so calm? Are they interfering with your systems like before?”

“Not a badly as before. I still have motor function and my systems appear to be running normally, but I cannot access my strength, and my calculative abilities and depth perceptions are misconstrued.” He paused and looked down at her. “I am not calm, I am simply limited.”

“Well, we need you at your best if we’re going to rescue Riki,” she stated and wandered around the small enclosure, looking for a secret away in or out, or some other tool that she could use to break his bonds. “Who do you think these people are?”

“I have many enemies, but I do not believe it is any of them. They would not dare do this to me, for starters, and they would be using Riki against me, not the other way around.”

“I agree.” She returned to him and tested the bands around his wrists again. Even if she reverted to her natural form, she didn’t think the added strength would break them, but she could try. “How fond are you of your hands?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If these things are running on some kind of generated pulse, then the key is to break the line circuit in one, to short out the others.”

“Agreed. However I cannot break them while the circuit is complete.”

“So, I ask again, how fond are you of your hands?”

Iason stared at her for a long moment as he realized what she was suggesting. “Do you believe you will be strong enough?”

“No. I may not be able to break them at all. I may just snap your hand off at the wrist trying.”

Iason didn’t much care if he lost a hand, as long as he had one left to strangle who ever tried to take Riki from him. “Do it.”

“Okay. Could you...er...close your eyes please?”

“Why?”

“Because I need to fully transform and I...don’t want an audience.”

Iason was surprised, since the woman did not seem the least bit embarrassed about being nude in front of him. “I would like to watch. I believe I will find it fascinating.” She stared hard at him, and when he refused to waiver, she crossed her arms over her chest. It was such a belligerent gesture, and reminded him of so much of Riki, that he agreed to her condition. Wishing to depart this place and find his beloved as soon as possible.

The moment Iason’s eyes closed he heard a strange moaning that was neither pleasure nor pain, but he respected her wishes and did not open them again until she told him too. When she did, he was impressed by the creature before him. Tall, lean and muscular, with an animal’s prowess and a feminine grace, she was truly a wondrous sight in black and gold.

“Why do you not try the ones at the bottom first?” he asked, as she moved closer.

“Because if I pull a foot off how will you walk? Or do you expect me to carry you?” She placed a hand on his shoulder, hoisted herself up and then a long, clawed foot was on the wall next to his head. “I have better leverage this way.”

Iason watched as she put her other foot on the opposite side of the binder she was gripping, astounded at her flexibility. “If the current rebounds you may be injured.”

She met his gaze, her face impressively close to his own. “I know. Ready?”

“Wait.” She stared at him. “Thank you, Carrie.”

She lifted an eyebrow and grinned with razor sharp teeth. “For what?”

“For making Riki part of your Pride.”

Silence fell between them for a moment, then another. “You’re part of it too,” she murmured and then gripped the binder, missing the surprised look on Iason’s face.

A sound at the far wall had them both sharing another quick look, before Carrie flipped backwards from her position and landed where she had originally awakened. As a portion of the wall started to open, she set the manacle around her ankle, then curled up against the wall as if asleep.

Two guards in shining silver and blue armor entered pointing weapons at Iason. “You will come with us android.”

“Will I?”

“If you try anything we will destroy you.”

“It is important to have goals.”

One of them pulled a device from their pocket and pressed a button, Iason’s bindings released instantly and he felt a surge of strength. His eyes flashed red in anger, and the guards raised their weapons into a more secure aiming

position, but he knew that brute force would not help him find Riki so he forced himself to appear calm.

He stepped forward and smirked as one of the guards almost stumbled backwards, but caught himself and balanced his weapon again. Fear was a wonderful thing, he thought as he lifted his hands and started to slide out of his long jacket, leaving him in bare arms and his dress tunic.

“What are you doing? Hands at your sides!”

“Are you frightened?” Iason asked as he stepped over to Carrie, crouched and draped the jacket over her naked form. “Or simply ill-bred?”

The guards shared a glance, then turned back to him. “Keep our hands at your sides and move.”

Iason rose to his full, impressive height, towering over the guards, and moved towards the opening. The guards followed him out and the wall slid closed.

Carrie grinned as she sat up, kicked off the shackle and rose to slide her arms into Iason’s jacket. It fell almost to her knees, covering her nicely, but she had to roll the sleeves up several times to find her hands.

Glancing up at the grate above them, she crouched, then leapt, bounding from one wall to the other in an impressive display of agility, until she could grip the grate with her hands. Using the same leverage position she had with Iason, she braced her feet across the ceiling and pulled on the grate; it gave away easily, probably from years of years of exposure to the elements. The action caused her to drop from the ceiling, but she was a cat after all and landed on her feet. A moment later, she bounded up the walls again and was free.

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Riki awoke naked and in pain. Bright light flashed in his eyes and he couldn't see anything beyond it. His body was bound to a hard surface with straps that cut into his skin and there was some kind of device on his head that prevented him from moving it.

He heard strange clicking sounds from beyond the lights, and then something cold and slimy gripped his right arm. There was a sharp pain just above his wrist and what felt like hot spike with a thousand legs slowly crawling from the entry point up his arm and into his neck. He screamed and screamed, but no one came to help him. The pain went on forever, wiggling over his throat, down his chest, his groin, down one leg then up the other to crawl up his side across his shoulder and back down his left arm.

He whimpered and sobbed and the slimy cold grip returned, in his left arm this time, as something was pulled out of his wrist. There was more clicking and all he could do was cry because he didn't know where he was or why this was being done to him.

Something else crawled through his arm, but this time it felt like a liquid and had a numbing effect over the rest of his body. He sobbed in relief and then cried out when the light was extinguished and he was left in complete and total darkness.

"Help me! Please! Turn on the lights! Please!" the light was better than the dark. Monsters came to find you in the dark, but now they came in the light too.

More clicking, and then he recognized a voice, a language that he understood, but his desperate hope soon turned to terror as the man said.

"Finish your tests, but keep him in one piece. I can get a very good price for a darky like him."

A darky? What was a darky? Were they talking about him? Were they going to sell him? They couldn't sell him! Didn't they know who he was?

Shouldn't someone tell them who he was?

"Papa! Papa help me!" he cried, just as the pain began again.

Riki awoke screaming and became even more confused and fearful to find a beautiful dark skinned woman hovering over him. She was speaking to him in words he didn't understand, and when she tried to draw nearer to him, he violently shoved her away.

She tumbled through a veil of golden material that bordered a strange bed and Riki blinked in surprised when she disappeared completely from view. Free from his nightmare, he slowly returned to his senses and tried to take in his surroundings.

He was lying in an enormous bed, even bigger than the one he shared with Iason, and he was naked. The events of what had transpired came back to him, and so did his fury. "Mother fuckers," He tossed back the covers and started to crawl towards one side to pull back the curtains, then quickly let the drape fall back in place again as he stumbled back onto the bed.

Females! Three females kneeling by the bed. He moved to the other side and found three more in the exact same position, including the one he had knocked away from him. Riki had seen females before, had even mated with one, but they had been pets and were young and underdeveloped. These females were most certainly past their puberty stage and were dressed only in an assortment of strategically placed scarfs. It was as if they stepped out of the pages of the porn magazines he used to have in Ceres.

He backed up to the pillows again as the left side of the curtain opened and he grabbed the sheets to cover himself. A woman with dark skin and eyes and long flowing black hair smiled at him.

"Are you well Maku?"

He blinked at her, she spoke his language? "Who...who are you?" he demanded, disturbed that his body was reacting to her beauty and near nakedness. Calm down! Iason would kill him if...Iason. Shit! "Where's Iason? Where's Carrie?"

“I am called Yilea. Your guests are resting, Maku.”

“I’m not Maku! Why do you keep calling me that?”

“It is your place and how all of our people will address you.”

What did that mean? “L...look...whoever you are, I don’t have a...a place. I’m just a Mongrel from Ceres, so tell me where my friends are and...” He swallowed hard as she started to crawl towards him on the bed. “And where the fuck are my clothes?”

“We will be happy to dress you, Maku.”

“I can dress myself just bring me my damn clothes!” What was it with people always wanting to dress him like he was some fucking doll? “I want my clothes and I...I want you to take me to my friends.”

Another woman appeared on the other side of the bed as the curtains surrounding it were pulled back on all sides, causing him to feel more exposed. She held a bundle of colorful clothing towards him.

“No. No. *My* clothes,” he insisted and slapped at a third woman as she climbed onto the bed and pulled at the sheet he was using to shield his body. “My clothes are black. I want my clothes.”

“Those clothes were discarded, Maku.”

“What? Why?” Let go!” He got into a tug of war with two women as they pulled at his sheets. “Fuck off already!” He didn’t like to hit women, not that he had ever met enough to confirm that rule, but there was always a first time.

“We are your Serago, Maku. We will bathe and dress you, that is one of our duties.”

“You have the wrong fucking person!” he growled, and gasped when the women’s insistence plied the sheet away from him. He dove past them, rolled and tumbled off the bed, grabbing the first thing he could find, a wide, cushioned pillow from where the females had been kneeling, and

threw it in front of him. “The next person who touches me is gonna get it! I’m not playing around! I will seriously hurt you!”

Yilea waved at the others, who slid off the bed and moved to stand against the far wall of the plush and exotic bedroom. Why was he here and not in a cage or something? Where the hell was he and why were his kidnappers putting him up in such comfort? He glanced around the massive room, alive with stunning colors and plant life. The walls were cream with a display of vivid colours thrown everywhere, in tapestries, curtains, pillows, furniture and paintings.

Scowling he stepped back as the older woman neared him and his bare foot touched a soft, spongy material that covered one section of the floor. Startled by the texture, he stumbled forward and stared at the odd covering. Unlike the cool, flat floors of Iason’s condo, this...thing was wispy and fluffy and shaded the deep bronze of a setting sun. Tentatively, he put one foot down on it again, soft...incredibly, soft but strange against his skin. He placed a second foot on the rug, expecting to sink down through it, but it held firm.

“Maku.”

Riki turned and found the female standing far too close to him. “My name is Riki!” He insisted and stumbled back from her, tripping on the raised fibers of the rug and falling into a wide, gold guided chair. “Where’s Iason? Why am I here?”

“You are here because you must be here.” Yilea lifted her head towards a huge sunken tub over by a set of glass windows. “Allow us to bathe you, Maku.”

“No. I won’t want a bath. I want my clothes!”

With an almost invisible sigh, the female nodded to one of the other girls and she scurried off. “We shall look for the clothes you were wearing. It may take some time.” She gestured and the girl who was still holding the colorful garments stepped towards her. “You may wear these until we can



find what has happened to the others. Is that not acceptable, or do you prefer to remain in the altogether?"

Altogether? Did she mean naked? Was she trying to be funny? "Fine." He rose from the chair, snatched the garments from the younger female with one hand. "I'll wear them, now get out."

With another wave of her hand, the female in charge dismissed the other women and a moment later it was just her and Riki left in the room.

"That means you too," he sneered.

"I cannot leave, Maku. I am bound to remain at your side for as long as you may need me."

"I *don't* need you, that's the fucking point." When she continued to stare at him, he realized that this was getting him nowhere. He saw where the door was now, although he hadn't been able to tell earlier as it melded with the rest of the walls. "Fine, do what you want."

He dropped the pillow and turned his back to her as he tried to figure out the new clothes he had been given. Deep blue leggings, a red tunic with laces and wide sleeves, some kind of blue half-jacket and what looked to Riki like fucking slippers with miles of leather straps! There was also a strange looking triangle with a string, which he wasn't sure what to do with, so he tossed it to the floor and pulled on the leggings.

"Y...you should put this on first!" the woman stated, looking for the first time slightly flustered as she picked up the discarded garment.

"Why?" he demanded as he slid his arms into the tunic, glad that it hung past his waist because the leggings were incredibly tight and did nothing to hide the fact that he was a man.

"To cover yourself!"

"I am covered."

“This is for your...your private area, Maku. You cannot go outside without it.”

He turned back towards her as he pulled on the jacket. “How are these things done up?” he demanded of the laces in front of his shirt. He didn’t understand what she was going on about. Why would he wear a scrap of cloth inside his trousers? He couldn’t even imagine how uncomfortable that would be.

She stepped forward and expertly tied the laces.

“Am I dressed now?”

She nodded and a small smile formed on her very red lips. “You look very handsome, Maku.”

“Good.” He shoved her with all his might, catching her by surprise so that she immediately fell to the floor, as he bolted for that section of wall. He had to get out of here and find Carrie and Iason. He desperately felt around for the way to open it.

He heard a click as his fingers touched a portion of the moulding that wound all the way around the room, dividing the walls in half and the passage slid open.

“Maku, wait!”

Riki ignored her and leapt through the doorway, only to run smack into two guards in full body armor from their heads to their toes; he couldn’t even see their faces except for a slit in their helmets which allowed them see.

“It is time Maku.”

Riki tried to push past them but it was no use, they already had him tightly by the arm. “Fucking let go of me!”

“It is time for you to come with us now.”

“Screw you.” Riki managed to get one arm free and tried to sucker punch one of them, but they were better trained than the men he had originally battled on Amoï and they had him pinned on either side between them within seconds. “Hey! Get your filthy hands off of me!”

“His feet!” Yilea cried as she hurried out and dropped down in front of Riki the strange slippers in her hands. “His feet must be covered.”

“I don’t want to wear them, damn it!” he insisted, but she’d slipped them on both of his feet and tied them up before he could blink.

“Forgive our touch, Maku.” One of the guards said. “We must bring you with us now.”

Riki was slightly alarmed when they actually lifted him off his feet and started walking. “Hey. Hey! Put me down, damn it, I can walk!”

They set him down and stared at him, patiently. “Please walk then, Maku.”

Riki glared and allowed himself to be herded down a long, impossibly wide corridor. His eyes looked everywhere, searching for an escape route, or a hostage, or anything that could get him out of this situation. He was shocked when the people they passed along the way stopped what they were doing and bowed low from the waist.

“What...what are they doing? Why are they doing that?”

The guards and the woman were silent as they continued to walk.

“Look, I want to see my friends, the people I came with. I’ll do whatever you want, just let me see them first okay?”

“Your guests are resting, Maku.”

So, Iason and Carrie were here, and supposedly still alive, though they could be lying. “Take me to them. I want to see them.”

“Not at this time, Maku.”

Riki stopped walking, suddenly frustrated, as they came upon an enormous set of double doors. “Look, why do you keep calling me Maku? What does that mean? Are you insulting me, proposing to me, what?”

The doors opened wide by two other guards from the inside and Riki gaped at the massive chamber before him.

Yilea stepped up to Riki and whispered in his ear. “Maku in your language, means My Prince.”

Riki felt his heart stop as he was ushered into the throne room.

## Chapter 20

### Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul, Cal and Katze make a plan, Shiao and Guy cause a distraction and Riki meets the man behind all the recent trouble.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so I apologize in advance if there are any spelling or grammatical errors, I am having to borrow my neighbor's wi-fi and don't have the time to check it more thoroughly. I wanted to get this up to you and please note I did NOT end it on a cliff hanger and the reason is because I am not sure I will be able to get another chapter up until after Christmas, it is just too chaotic here.

I probably did not make it clear in the last chapter, but when Riki is walking to the throne room they are already on the planet. Sorry. (Shiao and Guy fell asleep in the cargo hold and time was dragging so I sped it up a bit! :) )

I hope you can forgive me and once again thank you so so much for all your wonderful comments. That is all I want for Christmas is more amazing reviews!

Merry Christmas!

“Avalon.”

Raoul and Katze stared at the information that Cal had pulled up on Raoul's computer screen. As a Blondie he had access to all the information in the system, including the archives that Cal had been researching previously.

They had searched everywhere and confirmed that Iason and Riki were nowhere to be found. Katze used his black market contacts in Midas and Ceres to start a search, but now, hours later they still had nothing.

Jupiter was preparing for Junpin so could not be contacted, and Raoul knew that time was growing short for them to find their missing friends, because soon he would have to go into seclusion with the other Elites. He had to find Iason before then, because if Iason fell into The Sleep and Jupiter's mind could not reach him, the complete isolation and silence might drive his friend mad.

Raoul had cornered Rodin, but Parasysl had already gotten to him and despite Raoul's skillful methods, the Ruby recalled nothing about his agreement to get rid of Riki.

They finally returned to Raoul's condo, where Raoul had told Cal and Anjell to wait, because he did not want to take the chance of someone snatching the young boy and thus losing the only other person who had any insight into who might be behind Iason and Riki's disappearance.

"It says here the third planet in the Delta system was populated by a group of extremists from New Earth." Katze placed a hand on Cal's shoulder and leaned over him to continue reading. "They wanted to create a utopia like the ones they heard about in the stories passed down from Old Earth, before it imploded."

"What made you think of this place?" Raoul inquired as he signalled his Furniture to bring refreshments.

"Well, Riki's skin is darker than most other mongrels I've ever known, and not only that but he seems to have a subconscious attraction to Earth type culture. Since it would have taken several light years to travel to our solar system from New Earth, I ruled that and other farther planets out. I decided to search for other planets in the systems closer to us that had similar Earthian cultures."

Katze straightened, he squeezed the boy's shoulder and smiled. "Great job."

"I agree," Raoul offered. "Your logic and deductive reasoning are flawless." He leaned down closer to Cal and stared hard enough to make the boy blush. "Are you sure you're Human?"

“Q...quite sure, Sir,” Cal stammered, then flushed harder because he shouldn’t be so easily embarrassed. He cleared his throat as he switched to another file. “This was one of three that I researched, but I suspected Avalon was the right one when I saw this.”

He pulled up a hologram of an old portrait, no doubt added years ago just as a reference point. A dark man and woman stood together smiling, and between them, a young boy with matching dark hair and skin, his arms folded petulantly, his legs spread and his chin jutting out in rebellion. As Cal requested an increased view of section 3.4, the view of the boy grew larger and clearer, blocking out all but the lower half of his guardians.

“Riki,” Katze murmured, there was no mistaking those flashing obsidian eyes. “So his family are politicians?”

Cal shook his head. “This picture is of the King and Queen of Avalon, they rule their entire planet, and the boy is listed as their son Ceil, Prince of Avalon.”

Katze gaped. “A Prince?”

Raoul scowled. “A Prince? Are you serious?”

“Oh no!”

Everyone glanced at Anjell who they had forgotten was still there, because he was huddled quietly in the corner of Raoul’s office. The boy was holding his face in his hands and trembling.

“Whatever is wrong with you now, pet?” Raoul demanded as his Furniture appeared with a tray of drinks for everyone and he took two and handed one to Katze.

“I was so forward with him, I...I actually asked him to be my friend, and he’s a Prince! Now I truly will be destroyed.”

Raoul rolled his eyes as Katze exchanged a look with Cal, who immediately rose, took the two remaining glasses off the Furniture’s tray, and walked

over to Anjell.

He crouched down in front of the boy. “Why do you think that?”

“On my world, to even speak to a member of the royal family without previous consent means banishment. Here I am a...a mere pet, and have not only spoken to a Prince but laid hands on him,” Anjell sniffed as he thought how foolish he had been to try and cover Riki’s body with his own in an effort to save the mongrel pain. “I have been unconscionable, broken every rule and soiled him!”

“I hear the mongrel likes to be soiled, so I would worry no more about it,” Raoul smirked as he sipped his wine.

Cal patted Anjell’s head. “Do you really think Riki would care that he is a Prince and you are a pet?”

“How could he not?”

“Because he...” Cal searched for a valid reason and could come up with none. “He’s Riki.”

Anjell lifted his tear-filled gaze and met Cal’s kind one. “Do...do you think he...that we could still be friends?”

“That I don’t know.” Getting close to Riki was like trying to fill a hole, with a smaller hole while wearing blinders and driving a car. “But I do know that whether or not he decides to accept your friendship, it will not matter what position either of you hold. It will be based solely on his own requirements for friendship, such as trust and loyalty.”

“Are...are you Riki’s friend?”

Cal paused. He wasn’t sure how to answer that, because in reality the idea had never occurred to him. “I am his teacher.”

“But he listens to you.”

Cal lowered his head, shyly. “Only sometimes.”



“How touching, I may vomit,” Raoul mocked. “Finding Iason is the priority, so can we move this history lesson along?”

“Apologies, Sir.” Cal quickly rose and returned to the console. “From the information I gathered this could be the planet of Riki’s origin, however, I have no substantial proof that they are behind Riki and Master Iason’s disappearance.”

Katze nodded as he pulled out a cigarette. He glanced at Raoul who nodded, then lit the smoke and inhaled deeply. “I’ve checked with my contacts at the port terminals,” he stated quietly. “There have been an influx of off world transports for the festivals, but only two that have left today.”

“So we need to track those two ships...” Raoul began.

“Can’t be done, they had Rippers installed, blocking their ship’s signature and origin.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Cal gasped and watched Katze smirk.

“Lots of things are.”

“So...does that mean we have no way of finding them?”

Raoul finished off his drink and set the glass down. “No, it simply means we have only one solid lead left.”

“Avalon,” Katze stated quietly and watched the Blondie nod.

“How long would it take for a ship to get from here to there?”

Katze shrugged. “Depends on if the ship is flying impulse or has Radion Capacitors.”

“The planet seems advanced enough, but it is still quite a distance from here. What is your best estimate?”

“How far is Avalon from us?” Katze asked Cal and the young boy pulled a file out of the console and tossed it into the air in front of them, allowing a

much larger and three-dimensional view of their current solar system.

“This is Amoï,” Cal said pointing the mostly brown planet. “And this is Avalon.” He drew a red line from the brown planet through the current solar system and into the next system, to a green and blue planet. “Approximately two and a half light years away.”

Katze stared at the diagram and stroked his puffed in his cigarette. “So...if they have Radion Capacitors or some other kind of Light Drive, they could be Avalon in under ten hours.”

Raoul glanced at his wrist unit, it had already been eleven since Iason had gone missing. “Right. We’ll need to...” He paused as a sensation of drowsiness suddenly overtook him. “Damn it, I need more time.”

“Master Raoul? Are you unwell?” Anjell inquired kindly.

“I’m fine. You two stay here,” Raoul pointed at Cal and Anjell.

Anjell blinked in surprise. “Sh...shouldn’t I go back to my Master?” Not that he was in any rush. He was sure that his Master would be horribly angry for him having been gone all this time.

“You’re fine here for now, just stay...” Another wave hit him and he was touched that Katze actually moved in to steady him. “I didn’t think you cared.”

“I don’t,” Katze returned, but did not release his hold. “If you fall over we’ll have no way to move you.”

Raoul smirked. “Fair enough.” He dropped into the chair Cal had vacated. “I’ll have to count on you, Katze. I’m calling my assistant; he’ll get you our fastest ship. Do you know how to fly?”

“No.”

“Okay, so I’ll get a pilot as well.”

“Is there one you can trust? We can’t let anyone know that Iason has gone missing.”

“I know, but I am running out of time and limited on what I can do on such short notice...”

“Then don’t bother. I have some favors I can cash in that will get me to Avalon.”

Raoul nodded, the urge to leave and go to Jupiter was growing, and he knew he could not delay it any longer. He unlocked the desk drawer to his right and pulled out a small key card. “Show this at air-security and you will be cleared through.” He then pulled off his wrist unit and handed it to Katze with the key card. “This has a long distance receiver, as long as you can get near a transmitting tower we will be able to talk to you.”

“Won’t you be in seclusion?”

“Yes,” Raoul turned to Cal, put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Which is where you come in. You need to stay here and monitor for any incoming messages from Katze. While you’re waiting, see what else you can find out about these people, their strengths their weaknesses, what they import and export.”

Cal nodded, even as Anjell asked. “Why does that matter?”

“If they are unwilling to release Iason and Riki, we might be able to find something to trade for them,” Katze stated.

“O...oh.”

“We’ll sort out the details on the way to Jupiter’s Tower,” Raoul stated as he tossed Katze his keys then moved across the room, his Furniture suddenly appearing to follow him. “I have to change.”

Cal and Katze looked at one another.

“This is very bad, isn’t it?” Cal asked solomly.

“Yeah. It’s really bad.”

“Will you be able to get them out by yourself? Is there no one you can take with you?”

“No. The two people I completely trust are Iason and you.”

Cal blinked in surprised. “M...me?”

“Yeah, you. But you do need to stay here and help monitor my communications.”

“I...I am honoured that you trust me. I wish I could do more to help.”

Kazte walked over and patted his shoulder. “You’ve done more than enough,” he said as Raoul returned in black and gold regalia. “Make sure you both stay here. We don’t know if those people are still looking for you, so it’s safer if you stay inside.”

“Yes, I understand.” Cal sat down at Raoul’s desk again. “I will be here to take your calls, Katze. I won’t fail you.”

Raoul moved towards the exit portal and Katze followed. “If you need anything, ask Peter and he will get it for you.”

Cal glanced at the young, brunette boy and nodded. “Thank you, Sir.” He watched them leave and tried to ignore the heavy weight that seemed to settle in his stomach.

“C...can I help, sir?” Anjell inquired quietly.

“Absolutely. How are your reading skills?”

“They are very good.”

“Great.” Cal turned to Peter. “Can we get a second monitor?”

The young boy nodded and hurried off.

“Four eyes are better than two,” Cal smiled at Anjell, who practically glowed at him. “Let’s get started on learning all there is to know about Avalon.”

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One the alien ship landed, Guy and Shiao managed to slip out unseen, however they stood out among a race of dark skinned beings that appeared to reach their vertical peak at five feet nine inches. They were currently hiding behind a wide set of shrubberies outside an enormous palace. The ship had landed on a platform behind the castle, and had ushered their prisoners inside before Guy or Shiao could stop them. These people and their soldiers were quick and efficient.

“The Castle is well guarded,” Shiao muttered, he had already made a discrete tour of the property and the only entrances into the palace were manned with six guards each. “It’s almost as if they’re expecting trouble.” He grinned at the thought, then glanced sideways, surprised that Guy was not beside him. “Guy?”

Guy’s head and upper popped down from a large tree. “You say something?”

“What are you doing? Get down from there before you’re seen!”

Guy dropped to the ground, rolled and ended up beside Shiao behind the shrub. “Look! I think it’s some kind of fruit! I bit into one, see?” h=He showed Shiao the bright red item with an exposed chunk of white. “It’s real fruit! Not dried!” Guy took another bite and moaned. “It’s so good!”

Shiao grabbed the apples and tossed them away, ignoring Guy’s protest. “Have you forgotten why we’re here?”

“No! Of course not, but, shit Shiao, I’ve never tasted real fruit in my life! Cut me some slack!” No he had never had real fruit, not like that, nor had he ever seen grass this green or smelled the bark from a real tree. The planet

where they lived had some natural aspects, but it was nothing like this, and all the fruits were slightly bitter, you had to cook them to make them taste sweet.

“I’ll buy you a bucket load if we get out of this, now pay attention to our situation.”

“Okay, jeeze.” Guy glanced down at the second item he had found, a sweet smelling flower, with white petals and a purple center. “Here.”

Shiao scowled at the delicate bloom. “What is this?”

“I think it’s a flower. I found it over there.” Guy pointed to a wide garden of various floral species. “It smelled nice, so...I wanted to give it to you. As...payment, you know, for getting me through the trip and....singing and stuff.”

Shiao was touched by the gesture. “Thank you, Guy.” He slid the bloom in his pocket. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

Guy grinned and as his heart turned over in his chest. Shit, he was actually falling for an Elite! What was wrong with him. His smile faded and he glanced over the hedge at the castle. “So...how are we gonna do this?”

“I’m not sure. We could just walk in and demand to see them.”

“They’d probably shoot us.”

“No probably involved.”

“So...what then?”

“We can’t pass as a local, and I’ve no idea even what planet we are on so I have no frame of reference to devise a solid plan. I haven’t seen any other races in the limited area we’ve been cornered to, so I’ve no idea how they feel about outsiders.”

“So, basically....we’re fucked.”

Shiao chuckled. “Ah, there’s that Ceres charm.”

“Charm,” Guy repeated quietly. “Let’s try and charm them.”

“I don’t understand.”

Guy ran his fingers through his hair. “Work your way around to the left side of the doors there,” he suggested. “And wait for the guards to move away.”

“What makes you think...?” Shiao began as Guy started to remove his clothing. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna charm them, of course.”

Before Shiao could respond a naked Guy hopped over the shrubbery and raced towards the main entrance of the castle.

“I’m a little teapot, short and stout,” he called as he started running through the gardens that boarded the path to the gate. “Come over here and I’ll fuck your mouth!”

Whether the guards were appalled by seeing a naked, pale skin human running through the garden, or they were shocked by his language, three of the guards immediately gave chase, which left only three guarding the gateway, enough for Shiao to easily handle. He moved swiftly and silently, using the distraction as two of the guards took a few steps away from the gate, trying to watch as Guy and their comrades moved out of their direct line of sight.

Shiao wrapped his arm around the lone single guard that remained closest to the door, managing to get his arm between the heavy metal armor of the man’s breastplate and into the softer cloth around his neck. He squeezed, and the man was unconscious a moment later. Carefully laying him on the ground so as to avoid making any noise, Shiao slipped through the gate and out of sight, while the other guards were still turned away and watching the show.

The main hallway opened up into a cathedral ceiling and a gallery of armored men bordering both sides. Shiao cursed, as there was no where to hide, and waited for them to approach. However, after a time, no one moved. Curious he walked over to them and poked one in the chest. Solid, and immobile. He slid a finger into the both slot of the mask and lifted.

“How odd.” There was no one inside the suit. He walked across the gallery and did the same to the opposing armoured man. “Why would they have empty armour standing around?” he wondered aloud, then heard a loud crash outside the entranceway where he had come in. He wanted to go and check on Guy, but the mongrel had given him this chance to get inside, and he had to make Iason his priority. Besides, Guy was savvy enough that he should be able to stall for time and not get himself killed.

Shiao continued to move discretely through the corridors, wishing the connection with Jupiter was still in effect so she might be able to give him some insight into where Iason was. Slowly, he moved forward.

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Riki heard the massive doors close behind him and nearly shuddered from it. He started the walk across a long, gold and black checkered floor, where a man with dark skin and long black hair sat on a large golden throne. Something about the man pulled at Riki, something familiar and yet frightening, and as he grew nearer, Riki’s heartrate increased tenfold and he started to shake.

The man at the end of the walkway wore blue leggings, a white and gold shirt and a blue and gold robe. A thin golden band wrapped around the man’s head, with a glittering of colored jewels evenly spaced through the crown; the exception was a large, sparkling blue stone that shone brighter than the others and appeared to have a white cross or star etched inside of it.

Riki watched as the guards who were leading him, moved to kneel on one knee. “Your majesty.”



“Leave us.”

The two guards and woman left the room and as the King rose Riki saw the spark of obsidian eyes. He swallowed, hard.

“Hello Ciel.”

Riki stared at the man in whose hair, skin and eyes so matched his own. Was he dreaming still? Was he actually asleep back in Iason’s condo and this was all just a really long and bizarre dream? What other explanation was there to see the man from his flashbacks, his nightmares standing before him, exactly as he had remembered him? Was this his father? The resemblance was uncanny and yet he couldn’t make himself move, couldn’t force words through the giant lump in his throat.

The King stepped down off the dais reached out his hand. “Son?”

Son? Riki had never heard that term before, not directed at him. Was he a son? A son and a Prince, to a King? The urge to laugh rose up inside of him, but he recognized the beginnings of hysteria and pushed it back. Son. What right did this man have to call him that? Why hadn’t he come back for him? Why had he left him in the forest? If he was alive, why hadn’t he tried to find him?

“Don’t be scared, son.”

“Scared?” the word hissed out of Riki’s mouth before he could stop it as his confusion and hysteria turned to rage. “What the fuck do you know about being scared? You left me. I was four years old and you fucking *left* me!”

A flash of grief flickered across the King’s face and he nodded. “I know. It was beyond my control, Ciel. You have to understand...I wanted you safe and...”

“Safe?” Riki’s fists curled at his side as he thought of everything he went through, from the horror of living in Guardian, to selling his body to survive in Ceres, to being kidnapped and trained by Iason Mink. “YOU LEFT ME!”

Iason was just outside the throne room doors when he heard his lover scream. He quickly dispersed of his guards and ran inside. “Riki!” he could see the rage emanating from the mongrel, and something else, grief perhaps?

Riki turned and suddenly he was running towards Iason with tears in his eyes.

“Riki.” Iason caught the mongrel in his arms, just as he received a hard blow to the back of his neck that dropped him to one knee, but he took Riki down with him, refusing to let go.

“Stop it!” Riki cried as he tried to ward off another strike from the guard. “Leave him alone!”

The guard looked to the King for direction and when he nodded, they stepped back, but again readied their weapons.

“Why do you defend it?” The King demanded, frowning. “It is but a filthy machine. An unnatural creation!”

“He’s my *master*,” Riki growled, surprising both men as he helped Iason rise then he faced the King, his hands curled into fists at his sides.

Iason, who had waited years for such an admission from Riki felt none of the pleasure or triumph he expected he would feel at finally hearing those words. What he did feel was not pleasure, but nor was it pain. It was an unpleasant, hollow feeling and he didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m his *pet*!” Riki continued, furious. “He fucks me whenever he wants and I obey because that’s what I’ve been trained to do.” He could see each of his words hitting their mark as the King’s dark skin grew paler by the second. “That’s what happens when you abandon someone, they have to fend for themselves, for survival...”

“Ciel! I never intended...”

“Did you even look for me? Did you once give a thought to me after you ran?”

“Son...”

“Four days! I was in that tree for four fucking days waiting for you to come back and you never did.”

“I couldn’t!” The King began.

“Four days?” Iason repeated coldly and turned his icy stare to the man by the throne. “You left a child alone for four days exposed to the elements?”

The King strode towards them. “Do not speak to me on how to treat children, android! I know how you enslave children only that they be molested and indentured as servants!”

“You know nothing. They are children that would otherwise die of hunger or exposure in the streets. With us they are cared for and cherished. They are fed and clothed and all of their desires are fulfilled...”

“Desire? Do not speak to me of your heathen ways. What happens to these children when you are bored with them? It is my understanding that they are sold to brothel houses. Is that how you claim to cherish them?”

Iason would not deny such truth, but nor would he allow this man to insult him and his kind, especially in front of Riki. “Is leaving a child alone in a cold forest for days on end with no food, no shelter and no hope of rescue better?”

“I was injured! I had fallen into a gorge and broken both of my legs...”

“You obviously survived.”

“Yes! Eventually someone found me, but I was nearly delirious by that time and it took me almost a three days to heal...” The King turned to Riki, who was now staring at the floor, his hands still curled tightly against his thighs. “I feared what they would do to you, my son. I was trying to keep you safe. I wanted to avoid your being captured or tortured...”

“But I was.”

Both men stared at Riki, aghast by his quiet admission.

“Riki,” Iason began, as that strange flutter appeared in his chest again. “I never...”

“Not you.” Riki looked at him, then down again. “I...I never found the road out. I just kept wandering the forest and then...then they came and they took me.” Riki’s dream came back to him in full vivid reality and the horror of it almost made him weep, but he held on.

The King shook his head. “No. No, you were safe. You...”

Riki lifted his gaze to Iason again, refusing to acknowledge his father. “It happened after I came here. A...a dream, like the others but this one was... worse and more real. The reason I couldn’t remember why I ended up at Guardian, the reason that there was no room for me on a planet where there should be plenty was...because I wasn’t on that planet anymore.”

“Riki.”

“It’s...jumbled still, parts of it aren’t clear, but...I thought they were saying there was no room for me on the planet but it was a ship. I was on their ship and so they were going to sell me after...after...”

Iason pulled Riki into his arms, held him tight as his mind reeled with what could have been done to him. “Did they hurt you?”

“Y...yeah.” Riki closed his eyes against the memories that surged forward, ones he had been trying to deny for the last few weeks, but the feel of Iason’s arms around him almost caused him to break. “Not here,” he whispered. He couldn’t...wouldn’t do this in front anyone else.

“I understand,” Iason said and released Riki when the mongrel gently pushed at him.

“I’m...sorry that happened to you.” The King stated quietly, finally collecting himself as well. “I never wanted that to happen.” His gaze

flickered to the Blondie beside his son, then back to Riki. “Do you truly belong to this thing?”

Riki nodded.

“But you are free now. I can have it removed from your life forever and you will be free.”

The words were both sweet and sour to Riki, as he realized he could finally, truly have his wish, the one thing he always asked Iason for, but the cost of that wish being granted was too high. Even now, after everything, knowing he could run away, knowing that, while he didn’t fully understand it yet, there was another place for him, he couldn’t leave Iason.

“If you hurt him, I will kill you.”

The guards, hearing a threat against their King started to step forward, but the King waved them back.

“This is truly your wish, that it be spared? Despite all it has done?”

Riki nodded.

“Very well.” The King returned his gaze to Iason. “How much do you want?”

Iason raised an eyebrow as Riki gaped at the King. “I beg your pardon?”

“How much do you want to release my son?”

“You wish to purchase him from me?”

“Yes. Isn’t that how your kind work? You buy and sell people for profit?”

“Riki is mine. He is not for sale.”

“He is more mine than yours.”

“How so?”

“He is my son!”

“He *was* your son. A son you abandoned, which negates any legal hold you had on him.”

“I will not stand by and allow him to be kept and degraded by scum like you!”

Iason moved forward, but was stopped by Riki’s hand on his arm.

“Stop it.”

Both men looked down at him, startled by the quiet, but firm command.

“Ceil, let me deal with this. We have laws that can circumvent such...”

“It’s not up to you. It has nothing to do with you, and my name is Riki.”

“I am your father! I am trying to help you.”

Riki looked from the King to Iason, feeling torn and not understanding why. He hated his father, for abandoning him, but there was a small part of him that was desperate to talk to this man who called himself King. He loved Iason, but he once hated him too, and he still hated being a pet. Even though their relationship had matured into something more, in Tanagura he was still just property. Now he was being told he was a Prince? How was that even possible? How was this place, this situation even possible?

Iason caught Riki’s lowered chin, lifted it so the young man would meet his gaze. “Riki.”

“I...I don’t want you to fight over me.”

“We’re not fighting. There is no argument, you are mine.”

“He is not a toy!” The King insisted angrily and surged forward suddenly grabbing Iason’s wrist. “Get your filthy degenerate hands off of him!”

Iason smirked, and was about to lift the man and throw him against the wall, when he saw the pain in Riki's eyes. Instead, he remained calm. "I suggest you remove your hand," he replied, dangerously. "Riki does not wish me to hurt you, however, I do not like to be touched in such a manner. You have three seconds before I break your arm."

The King boldly held Iason's gaze for two and a half of those seconds, then snatched his hand away. Iason could see where Riki got at least some of his courage. "I won't allow him to be taken away from me again."

"Allow?" Iason raised an eyebrow again as the King stepped back and pressed a button on the arm of his throne. A moment later the chamber doors flew open and a dozen men armed with lasers entered. Iason's gaze flickered over them briefly. "Do you intend to keep us here?"

"Not you, just my son."

"So you want me to trade one jail for another?" Riki demanded bitterly, feeling a spark of fear curl through his stomach and into his chest. Those weren't ordinary lasers the guards were carrying, they were disrupters and they could do serious damage to an android body.

"This is your home, Ciel..."

"My name is *Riki*!"

The King flinched at the vehemence in his son's voice, and raised his hand to signal the guards to stay when they prepared to move forward. I am Nathaniel Pendragyn, King of Avalon, and you *are* Ceil Pendragyn, Prince of Avalon. This is the truth of it."

"Pendragyn?" Iason repeated, searching his database for where he had heard that name before.

"I would speak with my son alone, android." He nodded to the guards and they aimed at Iason. "You may step outside."

Iason didn't budge. "I think not."

Riki put his hand on Iason's chest, looked up at him. "Iason, they have disrupters."

"I will not leave you alone here..."

"It's fine." Riki glared at his father, then softened his gaze as he turned back to Iason. "Please?"

Iason scowled, then caught Riki's chin again, dipped his head and kissed him. "As you wish." His cold gaze leveled at Richard. "I don't care what sort of weapons or support you have, if you try to take Riki from me, you and everyone here will die."

"Wait." Riki caught Iason's arm as the Blondie started to turn away. "What about Carrie?"

Iason smiled and caressed his cheek. "She is fine, and probably in a much better place than we are at this moment."

Riki didn't understand what Iason meant, but his eyes stayed on the Blondie as he turned and marched towards the doors, followed closely by the four of the guards. The King waved at the other two and they also left the room, closing the door firmly behind them.

"Let's try to be calm," Nathaniel suggested as he moved across the throne room and through a door that lead to an enclosed alcove and parlor. He waited patiently for Riki to follow, which took several minutes because it appeared the mongrel was unwilling to move anywhere near him.

Finally Riki entered the room and the King walked to a small drink stand. "Are you thirsty? Hungry?"

"No."

"Ah, well fine then." Nathaniel fixed himself a drink then settled on one of the plush twin sofas. "Won't you sit? Let's try to have a reasonable conversation."



“I don’t need to sit. You kidnapped me, hurt my friends and brought me here...”

“We did not kidnap you, it was they who stole you from us!”

“Why am I here?”

“You belong here! This is your home!”

“You took me away from my home. I don’t know this place, I don’t want to be here!”

The King rubbed his forehead and sighed. “I understand you are upset, and I regret that I was forced to take such actions against you and your... friends. I wished only to bring you home, Ciel.”

“Riki!”

“Fine, then, Riki!” Nathaniel snapped. “Can we not just sit and talk? You must have questions and I am free to answer them.”

“I don’t have any questions.” Riki had a ton of questions but his pride would not allow him to ask them. “You brought me here, saw I am alive and well, and now you can let me go.”

“It is not that easy Ci...Riki.” Nathaniel again patted the space beside him. “Please, will you not sit? Let us have a calm, rational discussion, or are you incapable of such things after living so long with savages.”

Riki glared at him.

“I had thought you were dead, that I had lost you, and now here you stand before me. You must give me time to adjust, time for us to get to know one another.”

“I know all I need to know about you.” You’re a man who abandon’s children, Riki decided silently.

“I know nothing about you.” Nathanial again patted the space beside him. “I understand you are angry, you have every right to be, but please don’t walk away without telling me a little of yourself. Do I not deserve that much, as your father?” When Riki remained silent, he pressed forward. “Surely you have your own questions, about your heritage that I could answer? Don’t you want to know who you are?”

“I know who I am.” Riki was who he’d made himself become, and nothing he heard from this man would change that. Still, he was curious, how could he not be?

“Please, Riki?”

Riki sat, but on the opposite sofa. “Fine.” He’d ask his questions and then he and Iason could leave. “How old am I?”

“As of next month you will celebrate twenty-eight years.”

Riki gaped at him. “H...how old?”

“Twenty-eight. How old did you think you were?”

“I...They said at Guardian I was four when I arrived.”

“Guardian? What is that?”

“An orphanage. But they said I was four, so...I thought I was only twenty one.”

“Ah, well, our race age a little differently than some. Our bodies and appearance remain youthful well into middle age.”

“How...how old is middle age?”

“Oh, around about eighty years or so.”

Eighty! That mean he could live to be well over a hundred. Holy Fuck! The idea of being a pet for that long terrified him.

Sensing his dismay, the King rose and poured another drink, then sat next to Riki and offered the glass. “Is it such a shock?”

“Yeah.”

Riki wrapped his hands around the glass instantly, then paused and stared into the light color mixture. Having foolishly accepted colorful drinks once before, he wasn’t going to make the same mistake again. He set the glass on the table between the sofas and rose, trying to push his hands into his pockets and realizing there were none.

“Why didn’t you try to find me?”

“I did! Once I recovered my senses after my fall, it was the first thing on my mind, but I was badly injured and needed medical attention. I sent attendants out to search for you and they looked everywhere, truly they did, but you had vanished without a trace!”

“Bullshit!”

“It’s true! There was nothing. We checked with everyone, the Service, the orphanages, the hostels. My Knights even checked the transport logs for anyone going off planet! You had vanished!”

Riki walked over to a wide window and stared out at a lush and beautiful garden. It was much more vivid than then the conservatory in Eos, but then those plants were synthetic. He immediately wondered what it would smell like, and feel like to walk through all that color and freshness.

“I searched for you for ten years, son. I checked every transport that landed, had everyone questioned that came even for a visit if they had seen you. I sent requests to eight other planets, worried you had been taken by pirates.”

“Pirates?”

Richard nodded grimly. “Yes. We don’t have a problem with them anymore, however we did at that time. They liked to kidnap children and women and sell them off planet to slavers.”

But Riki hadn't been sold into slavery, he had been sold or placed in Guardian, which, while not a great place for a kid, it was safe and they were prepared to deal with children. Pirates wouldn't leave him there, and if they did, how much could they get by selling one more kid to an already overcrowded institution?

"I couldn't face the idea that you had died," Nathaniel continued quietly. "I was obsessed with finding you, but..." He spread his hands, helplessly. "I couldn't. My advisers, my wife and family all finally convinced me that you had to be dead, and that my search for you was ruining my work and my health. I had to give up, don't you see?"

Riki found it hard to swallow, or perhaps it was more that he was afraid to believe it. The only way he could fight the pain was with rage, as he always did. He rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand as the headache that had started that morning increased to a constant solid drill through his skull.

"Then we heard word about a dark skinned boy on Amoï, a pet that was unlike any of the other pets. A trader we do business with saw you there and told us. He saw the resemblance in you immediately, and suspected that you were my son. I came to find you as soon as I could."

Riki turned back to him, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the window. "Why all the secrecy and violence? Why didn't you just come and see Iason and tell him who you were, who you thought I was?"

Nathaniel grimaced. "That world is steeped in deception and sin. Your android would not have given you up and I knew that, so I acted in the only other way I could. I had to bring you home."

Riki stared at the King for a long time, then his gaze wandered around the room, taking in the strange furnishings and artwork on the walls. The long lines of cloth that draped around the windows and the bizarre texture of the mats covering certain sections of the floor.

He had to wonder if this really was where he was from. Yes Jupiter had unlocked some strange memories, and there was no doubt that he had seen the King before in those memories, but how could he trust that it was real?

If all of this was as the King said, he should have grown up pampered and secure, with plenty of food to eat and always a warm bed to sleep in.

He would never have had to learn to fight to survive, to trade his body and sexual skills to put food in his belly. Respect, he thought ironically. He would have had everyone's respect and he wouldn't have to injure or demean himself to do it. He would have had lots of sex with young pretty girls instead of shacking up with a hard and muscular pretty boy. He would have had people wishing to please him, instead of being kidnapped, tortured and trained to please a sadistic Blondie. He would have married a soft, sweet woman, instead of an inflexible, demanding android.

"Oh God," he muttered as he turned away and grabbed for the back of a wide chair as his knees threatened to give out. The injustice of it, the unfairness of all of this was too much. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be his life. Not *his*. He was Riki the Dark, a street mongrel and a pet. Nothing more. He could be nothing more.

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder and he angrily shrugged it off. "Don't touch me!"

"Son, I know this is a lot to take in, but let me help..." The King paused as a knock sounded at the chamber door and a guard entered. He spoke quietly to the King and Riki heard Nathaniel exclaim.

"He's naked?"

Riki raised an eyebrow, curious as Nathaniel nodded to the guard then turned back to Riki. "I am afraid we will have to continue our discussion later. Barmum will take you back to your rooms."

"And then bring Iason there."

The King's lips firmed in distaste. "I have promised not to hurt it, but I will not allow it to stay with you, Ce...Riki."

"Then take me to wherever he is."

The King sighed, heavily. “You are being unreasonable. We cannot trust...”

“I can’t trust you,” Riki snapped. “If you want me to stick around and willingly listen to your side of things then you have to give me some security. I trust Iason, I need him with me.”

“I don’t understand. Does he have you so completely under his spell?”

“It isn’t a spell, it’s just the way it is. Take me to him or bring him to me, otherwise I will fight and scream and find a way off this fucking planet even if I have to kill you and your whole damn family to do it.”

Nathaniel tried to stare down Riki, no doubt used to being in command and not given ultimatums, but regardless of whether Riki grew up as Royalty or not, he had the power to hold his own, even against a King.

“Fine! But I insist that take a bath and eat some food.”

“Sure, but I don’t need some woman to bathe me, I can do it on my own.”

“Very well.” Nathaniel turned back to the guard. “Bring my son to his chambers and then bring the...android there as well. Post four guards outside the door and two inside the room. Do not allow anyone other than myself in or out.”

“I thought I wasn’t a prisoner?” Riki sneered.

“You are not, it is for your safety. I do not trust that machine, so you will have to allow this small concession Riki until we get to know you’re android better.”

Riki nodded, fair enough and allowed himself to be quietly walked back to his room.

## Chapter 21

### Summary for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for your patience. I pray you find it worth the wait. Hoping you had a fantastic Christmas and a Happy New Year. Lots happening, so no summary description :)

Shiao studied the machinery that appeared to keep the castle and its defenses going. There were no guards here, which surprised him, but this was a bit of a backwater planet so perhaps they assumed only high ranking officials would have the capacity to understand or sabotage the computer's components.

The machinery looked complex, but the system itself was antiquated and could easily be reprogrammed. In order to discretely cause chaos and delay his presence there, he decided to set the machine to rolling black outs in certain areas, which would then cause minor inconveniences. As he removed an access panel, he hesitated over one portion of the programming. He did not wish anyone to be injured, but at least one major catastrophe would be required to keep the guards and everyone else occupied, while he searched for Iason. He smirked as he skinned a couple of wires and then intertwined them.

"That should do it," he decided as he replaced the panel so that no one would even know he was there.

Moving back through the access hatch he had crawled through earlier, he scaled the ladder and carefully lifted the tiled section of the floor above him. No one was about, so he hefted himself up, set the hatch back in place and covered it with the throw rug that had hidden it from view.

He moved to the doorway and waited for the first distraction to begin, but a sound outside quickly caused him to dart towards the heavy drapes at the window. He slid between them, and due to his exceptional vision was still able to see as the door opened and two guards shoved a naked figure inside.

“Stay there, and put these on.”

Guy smirked as he caught his clothes, which the guards had found by the bushes where he had dropped them. “Is this any way to treat a guest?” he called back as the door closed and locked.

“You are nothing but trouble.”

Guy spun around, preparing to fight, even though he only had one leg in his jeans then grinned at the Onyx who stepped out from his hiding place. He shoved his jeans all the way on. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Shiao stepped up and caught Guy’s head between his hands, turning it sideways twice as he studied the cut on Guy’s lip and the bruise forming over his right eye. “They hurt you.”

“Not near as much as I hurt them,” he assured, but his smile faded when Shiao continued to scowl, and he placed his hand over the one cupping his cheek. “I’m okay. Really.”

“That was a foolish and dangerous thing you did, Guy.”

“Yeah, but it worked. Have you found Riki?”

Shiao continued to stare at him and wondered what this strange feeling was rising in his chest. He had been worried for Guy, but had not allowed his concern to interfere with his mission. However, seeing the young man before him now, injured and near naked brought back his worry tenfold. Why had he allowed Guy to do such a foolish thing? What if the guards had shot him? What if Guy had died? He was Human and Human’s had fragile bodies.

The idea of Guy no longer sharing his meals or helping him bathe, or exploring his talent in the cycle shop... Could he go back to the life he’d lived before he had spotted that beautiful mongrel in the bath house that had found so intriguing? A life of endless work with no relief or feeling of achievement and a life so dreary and mundane that there was never anything to look forward to.



“Shiao?” Guy asked, when the Onyx continued to stare at him.

“Don’t...” Shiao began, and then wondered exactly what he was about to ask? Don’t be so reckless? Don’t fight? Guy was a mongrel, it was in his blood to do both. Don’t leave him alone? Don’t die? Don’t... “Don’t be so cocky,” he managed finally, ruffling Guy’s hair and stepping back, struggling to push back the overwhelming surge of emotions that was rising within him.

Guy watched Shiao move back towards the window.

“We should get out of here.”

“Wait!” Guy shrugged into his T-shirt and jacket. “If I stay here maybe they will let me see Riki. I can tell them I’m looking for him.”

“I highly doubt they will do that, Guy. More than likely they will shove you in a pit somewhere or schedule you for execution.”

“But maybe not! I’ll tell them I know Riki and have valuable information for them. At least I might be able to find out where he is?”

Shiao considered it. He could remain invisible if he choose to, but having to hide Guy, who the locals were already aware of would be more difficult. He pushed open the window and glanced down at the ten-foot drop. “Be careful then. There will be some commotions starting, try to stay out of the way and if they do bring you to Iason...”

“Iason’s here?” Guy demanded, his earlier humor gone. “Is that why Jupiter sent us here, to get her fucking Blondie back?”

Shiao stalked over and gripped Guy by the shoulders. “They have Iason *and* Riki; we are here to save them both.” His hands became gentle again. “This is not the time for animosity, Guy. I am counting on you to do your part to free them.”

“That’s not fair! You can’t ask me to save him. I fucking hate him!”

“I know, and it is a difficult choice, but I *am* asking you, as my friend, please do this for me.”

“Motherfucker.” Guy lowered his eyes, knowing he was going to give in because Shiao so rarely asked for his help in anything. He owed the Onyx, he owed him big and had never had the chance to pay him back. “He’ll try to kill me, you know that, right?”

“Listen to me, Guy. Iason will probably not be in any shape to attack.”

Guy’s gaze shot upwards again. “What do you mean?”

“He is nearing the Great Sleep, the time of joining. Jupiter will be unable to reach him out here, so I am depending on you to keep him grounded.”

“I don’t understand. Grounded? What do you mean?”

“When we go into the Deep Sleep it wipes all sights, sounds and memory from our minds, to make room only for Jupiter. If Jupiter is not there, the darkness, the isolation and emptiness can drive an android mad.”

“Mad? You mean he’ll go crazy?”

“In his mind, he will, because he will be desperate for stimulation and if none can be found his organic brains will seek distraction. This can lead to a type of madness that will end up with him never waking again.”

Shiao watched Guy’s expression change from one of confusion to one of interest and then finally triumph. “This cannot happen, Guy. You must promise me that you will do whatever you can to make sure that Iason does wake up.”

Guy shrugged, as he thought gleefully of a world without Iason Mink. Riki would be free again, free of the invisible chains that bound him, free of the monster that changed him. They could take Riki back with them, far away from Amoï and Iason Mink. He and Riki could make their dream of owning and working in a cycle shop a reality. They could...

“Guy.”

Guy lifted his excited gaze to Shiao.

“I need to trust you. Please do not allow Iason to die.”

Another shrug. “What can I do? I’m just a worthless mongrel, remember?”

“All you need to do is talk to him, or make sure that someone continues to talk to him for the twenty four hours he will be under. He will need something to focus on, something to hang on to. Do you understand?”

Guy chewed on his lower lip. There was no guarantee that he would even get to see Riki or Iason, like Shiao said, so even if he agreed he might never have to follow through with it. “You know what you’re asking me right? You know how fucked up it is to ask this of me, *right?*”

“I do know, but I also know that I helped you get in contact with your friend once before, and I have supported your obsession with him in whatever way I could...”

“Obsession!”

“I took you out of the bath house, away from the slums and the whoring and gave you a new life, Guy. I have given you a fresh start away from Riki and Iason, but I have never demanded you forget them. I have never belittled your love for your friend or scolded you for your hatred of Iason. I understand your feelings are strong, I accept it, but you must accept that I cannot allow Iason to die any more than you could allow Riki to die.”

“Why? You love him?”

“No. Not in that manner.” Shiao watched the lights around them flicker. “We haven’t much time, will you do this for me or not?”

“If you had to choose between Iason and me, who would you pick?” Guy demanded, without having any idea where the question came from or what kind of answer he was expecting.

“Could you so easily choose between me and your friend, Guy?”

“Sure. I’d choose Riki,” Guy stated thoughtlessly, and almost immediately wanted to take the words back when Shiao’s expression flickered in shadow. He hadn’t meant to say that. He wouldn’t want to choose between either of them. He loved Riki, but Shiao had done a lot for him too, meant a lot. “I...I mean...”

“I understand.” Shiao moved to the window. “Do what you must then. I will find a way to save Iason myself.”

“No, wait!” Guy rushed towards the window as he watched the Onyx jump out, but the room was suddenly plunged into darkness and he stumbled over a chair. He finally found his way to the window and stared down. “I didn’t mean it!” he cried, but there was no one there to hear him; Shiao had already disappeared.

The door behind him was thrown open as two guards with glowing sticks entered and immediately grabbed Guy back from the window.

“There will be no escape for you,” one of them said. “We are taking you to see the King.”

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Carrie leapt from one tree to another, and then balanced on a branch outside of a wide balcony as the balcony doors opened and two dark skinned men stepped out. One wore a gray robe with a hood, and had a dark beard covering most of his face. The other man sported much grander robes, a crown and jewels on his hands.

“Shall we cancel the celebration, Sarrum?”

The man with the crown shook his head. “No. We have been preparing for weeks for it, and all of the visitors are already here. It would be bad form to cancel it at the last minute.”

“Will the Prince be attending?”

The King gripped the railing until his dark knuckles were almost white, and then his shoulders slumped. "I would wish him there. It would be the perfect time to introduce him to his people, but..."

The man beside him waited patiently.

"He is being difficult."

"It must be quite a change for him. From what I have seen of Amoï, such a change in...status must be overwhelming."

"I know that!" The King snapped, then sighed and rested his arms on the railing. In a softer voice he continued. "I know that and I am trying to be patient. I appreciate your bringing him home, Gryffin."

"It was on your order, Sire and we live to serve you." Gryffin stroked his jaw. "He was stronger than we had anticipated. You would have been proud of how bravely he fought."

"From what you tell me he was fighting to save that damn machine. What is the hold that Android has over my son? How can we break it?"

"Their society is very different from ours. We cannot hope to understand what magic may have been used to bind the young Prince."

"If it were only magic that has created the bond, it could easily be broken." The King shook his head. "No, there is more here at work. Physiological damage perhaps?"

"It is too soon to tell."

"Yes." The King straightened. "He seems...uncomfortable around women. Why do you think this is?"

"During my time there I too noticed that there are few females in their society, perhaps he was not around them often enough."

The King suddenly smiled. "Then that is the answer. Perhaps his relationship with this thing was out of necessity, as there were so little

options. We need to find more women to subject him to.”

“He has shown only suspicion and annoyance for his Serago.”

“Exactly, how is that possible? The maidens selected to serve the Royal family are among the most beautiful in the Kingdom. How can any man not wish to be tended to by them?”

“It is an intriguing riddle, Sarrum. Perhaps it is because of their positions that he shows such disdain?”

“You think another type of women would interest him?”

“There will be several ladies at the celebration.”

“No, no...I mean yes those are fine, but his savage upbringing would not recognize the charms of that kind of woman, when he so easily can dismiss a handmaiden.” The King turned back towards the impressive view of floral gardens. “Perhaps only a base creature would spark his lust. We must find such a creature to break the bonds this machine has over Ciel.”

“Shall I request some of the local women?”

“Dancing girls!” The King spun around suddenly and clapped his hands together.

“Dancing girls, Sarrum?”

“Yes! What man can resist an exotic dancing girl from a faraway land? Have any been scheduled for the feast?”

“We have a few performers, but I am unaware if there are any dancing girls.” Gryffin paused. “I do not think the Queen would approve...”

The King waved his hand in dismissal. “Ordinarily I would agree, it is a crude form of entertainment that frequently demeans a woman, however she will understand when I explain it is for our son.”

“Where shall I start looking, Sire?”

“With the off-worlders visiting, there must be some pretty girls that dance. Perhaps one with pale skin, his android has very light skin, so perhaps that is his preference.”

Gryffin bowed lightly. “I will endeavor to find a match, Sarrum.”

“Good. Good.”

Both men turned as a guard appeared.

“Forgive the intrusion, Sire. They have brought the man from the garden.”

The King nodded. “Ah, yes. The naked runner.” He chuckled. “This is a story I look forward to hearing. Gryffin, you have my leave to go and do as we discussed.”

The hooded man nodded and turned away to disappear inside.

Carrie licked her palm and flattened the mane on her head. Exotic dancing girls huh? She just found an in to the castle.

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“Are you almost there?” Cal asked over the view screen of Katze’s ship, SkreeFlyer

“I’m about three hours out. Have you heard from Raoul?”

“He contacted us about twenty minutes ago to say that they were headed into seclusion.”

“Damn, that means Iason will be entering the Deep Sleep soon.” And he was still over three hours away.

“Yes.”

“I have a message for you from him.”

“I bet you do.” Katze smirked and adjusted the controls on the panel in front of him, he’d cruise on autopilot for the next two hours and take a nap once he was done talking to Cal. “Alright, let me have it.”

“He said to bring Master Iason home at any costs, or don’t bother coming back.” Cal lowered his eyes for a moment, in a brief sign of discomfort, then lifted them again. “I am almost sure he did not mean it really.”

“Oh, he meant it, and that’s fine, because if I can’t get Iason and Riki out of there, I’d have nothing to go back for anyway.”

Cal looked like he wanted to say something, but his lips pressed firmly together to keep it to himself.

“What?” Katze demanded. “Say what you’re thinking.”

“It’s nothing really.”

“Cal.”

“I only, well, I would miss you if you were not here. I am sure that despite Master Raoul’s order, he would also be upset if you did not return.”

Katze smiled, touched by the boy’s confession. “Well, I don’t give a rat’s ass what Raoul feels or wants.” His expression softened. “But if you want me to come back I will.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re friends, and I don’t have many.”

“Nor do I.” Cal’s lips turned upwards in a shy smile before he caught himself and returned to a more neutral expression. “I apologize that I do not have any better news for you in regards to possible bargaining material. Avalon is very independent and seems to export more than import. Much of their economy is self-supporting and almost all of their material needs are handled by locals.”



“What about atmospheric or planet degradation? Any global warming or planet shifting that we might be able to ease or assist with? Are they low on any resources or require additional power, of the kind that we could offer them?”

“No, nothing like that,” Cal returned. “It’s actually quite a remarkable planet and culture. They use wind and solar power for their energy resource, and their atmosphere is in exceptional shape. While they have achieved space travel and the like, much of their culture appears to be centered towards the naturalistic ambition. What resources they use, they quickly replenish and while there are signs of affluence among the population, their society does not appear based on wealth, but a more ingrown respect for each other and their roles in the community.”

“Hmmm...so you’re saying we have nothing we can offer?”

“There does not seem to be anything they desperately require.”

“A sign of a good ruler, I suppose.”

Cal paused again before speaking. “Do you think Riki would chose to stay in such a place? It would be better than his life here, would it not?”

“Screw Riki, if it’s as great as you say I’m moving there!”

Cal did smile then. “You will not.”

“No.” Katze also smiled. “It depends on if this Avalon is really like what you’re telling me. Corruption is everywhere, as is a division of the masses, it’s just more subtle in some places than what you see on Amoï.”

“Do you think they will try to use Riki, or hurt him?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say what Riki will do, he’s always been unpredictable, but I don’t think leaving Iason is an option for him anymore, even if he does have to stay as a pet.”

“Master Iason will not let him go. That is what you are saying.”

“That is what I’m saying.”

“Then, Riki’s choice makes no difference.”

“None.”

Cal sighed heavily and then caught himself. “I cannot deny that I would wish Riki to be back here with us.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll see what I can do. I’m shutting down the coms for a while to try and get some sleep, but call me on the emergency line if something important comes up.”

“Yes, I will. And I will keep reading and trying to find something we can use.”

“You do that. SkreeFlyer out.”

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Riki entered his room and found his regular clothes folded and placed on his bed with Yilea and two other women waiting beside it. What happened to no one else being allowed in his room?

“Get out,” he said, trying to shrug off the uncomfortable feeling of seeing so many women, they were so scarce in Ceres. Sure a few female pets in Tanagura, but they were just children and not fully developed like the females before him.

“We shall help you bathe and dress, Maku...” Yilea began kindly, and actually flinched at the look that Riki shot her.

“I said, get out. I don’t want your help.” He shoved past them and grabbed his clothes. “Where can I change?” When a girl stepped forward, Riki stepped back. “Alone. I want to change in private.”

It surprised him how quickly his request was granted as one of the girls pointed to an alcove that was hidden by a partial wall. In Tanagura it never mattered what he wanted, he was dressed and undressed at whim by either a Furniture or Iason. It felt...odd to have someone actually listen to him.

Riki moved towards the alcove and stepped behind the separating wall, where he found a large rounded basin, with strange fixtures coming out of it awaited him. Was that supposed to be a bath, he wondered and peered under the strange thing to find odd clawed feet holding it up. All of the baths in Eos were built into the floor and hardwired into the main house system. In Ceres he only had a small shower, but there was still nothing sticking out like this one had.

He searched the wall but there was no panel to operate the water.

“May I assist you, Maku?”

“I don’t need...” He began and Yilea smiled at him.

“It would be my pleasure to do so. Please, allow me to help you.”

Riki hugged his clothes to him, feeling uncomfortable and defensive. “Fine. How...do I put the water in?”

She continued to smile as she gracefully knelt by the tub and turned the golden fixtures. A thick stream flowed from the longer fixture and she slid her hand under the flow. “Do you like it hot or warm, Maku?”

“Stop calling me that. My name is Riki.”

“Hot or warm?”

He shrugged. Cal usually prepared the bath in Eos and he only ever had cold showers in Ceres.

“He prefers it to be one hundred and five degrees.”

Both turned to see Iason standing at the entrance of the doorway and Yilea almost frowned.

“So...hot?” she asked but her question was directed at Riki.

“Yes, quite hot.” Iason walked to the tub and the woman scrambled quickly back and rose to her feet. “Give me your hand, Riki.”

Yilea was obviously shocked when Riki immediately stepped forward and handed his hand to the android.

Iason placed their joined hands under the water flow. “Warmer or colder?”

Riki stared into Iason’s eyes, the urge to just crumple into Iason’s arms and cry or scream was strong now that he had the Blondie back at his side, and yet some of the old resentments were also starting to build, because of what Iason had turned him into. “Warmer,” he whispered and watched as Iason adjusted the temperature. “Okay.”

Iason nodded and turned an icy glaze towards Yilea. “Leave us.”

“I...” she began, but even she was not a match for the Android’s direct animosity. She stepped out, but almost immediately, a guard moved into view.

“Oh for fuck sake!” Riki growled, frustrated. He just wanted to be alone with Iason. “Get out!”

The guard continued to stand just inside the entrance of the alcove, remaining behind a faceless mask. When Iason started forward to physically remove the guard, Riki caught his arm. He didn’t them to use those weapons on Iason, or give them a reason to bring Iason back to whatever prison he had been in.

“It’s fine. I don’t care.” But he did care. He wanted to be alone with Iason. “Let’s just take a bath.”

Iason stared coldly at the guard then turned back as Riki started to undress. He did not want anyone else to see his lover naked, but he noticed that when he also started to disrobe there was an almost imperceptible flinch from the guard once his organs were exposed.

“Yeah, he’s fully functional,” Riki sneered as he stepped into the bath, hissed at the temperature and then slowly lowered himself. “Hot.”

Iason stepped in behind him, there was barely enough room for them both and some of the water sloshed onto the floor. “You chose the temperature,” he reminded gently as he picked up what he assumed was a washcloth and a strange looking square bar. He sniffed it, then pushed it over the cloth and watched as a thin film of foam appeared. “Ahh...interesting.”

“What is?” Riki dipped his head back as Iason showed him the soap.

“A wash-bar.” Iason dropped the cloth and applied the soap directly to Riki’s back, watching it foam again. “Fascinating.”

“I’m thrilled you’re entertained.”

Iason gently pulled Riki’s hair so his head dipped back again and went to kiss him, only to find the cold end of a disruptor pushing at his temple. Both glared up at the guard.

“The King orders there to be no fornication with the android.”

“Fuck you!” Riki hissed, splashing more water on the floor as he went to grab the rifle, but Iason caught his hand.

“Ssssh, pet,” he said and pulled Riki into his arms. “We will have time for that later when we are home.”

“This sucks,” Riki mumbled against Iason’s chest, even as the guard slowly retreated. “This is so fucked up.”

“Completely fucked up, yes.”

Riki gasped and his head shot up, because Iason never swore. Seeing the gleam of mischief in those blue eyes pulled a weak chuckle from him and he settled back against Iason. “Smartass.”

“Do you remember anything else?”

Riki took a deep breath, released it slowly. “Yeah.”

“Tell me.”

“That guy, the King, I kinda recognize him. I mean, his face, sort of, but it’s his voice that’s really familiar.”

“So you believe he is your father?”

The idea frightened and confounded Riki. “I don’t know. He’s definitely the man from my memories, from the flash backs, but...”

“But?”

“It doesn’t feel right. He doesn’t feel right.” Riki leaned his head back against Iason’s chest and closed his eyes. Riki didn’t know if this feeling he had towards the King was because of his general mistrust of people or if there was really something off. He also had no idea how he should feel about the man that was supposed to be his father. How did someone feel about that? What did it mean to be someone’s son and child? Was it the same as what he and Iason were to each other? It didn’t seem like it would be similar, but he had no other reference.

“Does the scenery seem familiar to you?” Iason asked as he wrapped his arms around Riki and slowly ran the soap bar over the mongrel’s chest. “This place, do you remember it?”

Riki shook his head and turned in Iason’s arms. “No. Nothing else. I don’t remember anything else.” And that concerned him. If this was supposed to be his home, his real home, why didn’t anything else seem familiar to him?

Iason held Riki and smoothed his hair. His lover trembled in his arms, and he had no doubt that the young man was close to his emotional breaking point. He was unsure what to make of all of this either. This place quite possibly could be Riki’s home planet, and the mongrel certainly recognized the King as his father, whether he admitted it or not, which meant that Riki truly was a Prince.

Such titles meant little on Amoï, be he Prince or mongrel, Riki was his and his alone. He would not allow anyone to take Riki from him. He had truly wanted to help Riki learn where he had come from, but he would never have allowed it if he'd known this would occur. He had never envisioned that he could lose Riki because of this new information.

He could see how this place would appeal to Riki, and cause his lover to turn from him and the life they had. In Tanagura, Riki felt shame for what he was, and while he was very important to Iason, he felt unaccepted and alienated by everyone else. Riki craved freedom, but he would not find such freedom in being a Prince, any more that he did as a pet.

On this world, he was obviously very important, but Humans were fickle things, and material goods and power often corrupted them. While he did not believe Riki had this flaw, preferring to be a pet to a Prince was certainly not something one could easily decide, regardless of the circumstances.

"I love you," he whispered in Riki's ear.

"I know," Riki murmured but did not meet Iason's gaze.

"We cannot stay here, Riki." Iason needed reassurance. He needed to know that Riki would return with him to Amoï. Any other conclusion was unfathomable. "Shall I tell you what your gift is for Junpin?"

Riki shook his head, took a deep breath then pushed back and picked up the bar of soap. "I'll see it later."

Did that mean that Riki did not intend to remain here? "Riki..." he began and a wave of drowsiness suddenly overcame him. What in the name of Jupiter...Another wave, and this time he could feel his limbs growing heavy. Jupiter! Junpin. The time of joining was almost upon him! He had no idea how far they were from Amoï, but would Jupiter be able to reach him here? What if she couldn't?

"Iason?"

Iason focused his eyes on Riki, willed them clear. "I am fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes." He stood suddenly. "Come, before we are withered."

Riki rose and accepted the towel that Iason handed him. They dried off, dressed and returned to the bedroom area.

"I think it would be best if I were to return to my cell, Riki." He did not want to leave Riki alone, but nor did he wish to be left vulnerable in the state that was about to occur. If he were back in his cell, perhaps Carrie will have found a way for them to escape and she could get him somewhere secluded where they could not use him against Riki, or disassemble him as he slept!

"What are you saying?" Riki began, just as the door to his chamber opened and an exquisitely beautiful woman stepped inside, followed by two guards.

She had hair the color of midnight, so blue it was almost black, which was styled in a dizzying display of intricate braids around the crown of her head, rising up several centimeters in the air. Soft looking curls dipped caressed high structured cheeks that appeared brushed in rich mahogany, while her remaining hair was worn in an intricate weave down her back that fell well past her hips.

Her eyes were the color pale moonlight, as it would be seen across a still lake late in the evening, with thick, dark lashes that curled exotically from their shimmering depths. A long, angular nose and full lips that were deeper than the sweetest red rose that begged to be kissed

A swirling, sleeveless green and gold sheathe covered a long, lithe body, with laced sandals upon her feet and coiling metal bracelets on her lower bare arms. Around her head, just above her eyebrows and seemingly woven into the braids of her hair was a band of gold with a simple green teardrop jewel that hung from the middle and kissed the center of her forehead.

"Hello, Ciel."



Riki recognized the lilting voice instantly and an unfamiliar emotion clutched at his chest. He knew her. He *knew* this woman. When she took a step forward, he took a step back.

“Are you afraid?” she asked, perplexed. “Of me?”

*‘Where could my little boy be? He must be here somewhere.’*

*He slid down further behind the chest and stifled a giggle with his mouth.*

*‘Oh dear, oh dear! Have the faeries captured him? He is so very pretty, it would be no wonder.’*

*He peeked over the chest to watch his mother look behind the draperies and then get down on her knees and check under the bed.*

*‘His papa will be so cross if I’ve lost him again. Whatever shall I do?’*

*He stifled another giggle.*

*“Well, there is nought for it. I shall have to eat this brownie all by myself.”*

*Brownie! Cake! Chocolate! He jumped up from his hiding spot, expecting her to still be across the room, but her arms wrapped around him so quickly that he squealed in delight.*

*‘Now I have you and instead of the brownie I shall eat you!’*

*He laughed and squealed, and reveled as his mother tickled and kissed and hugged him.*

*‘You are mine, you little imp, and I’ll never let you go! Nom Nom!’*

Riki stared at the woman in horror as the memory played out in his mind, the sound of her laughter as she tickled him and the soothing melody as she sung him to sleep. The smell of cinnamon spice and chocolate. His mother. This woman...this woman was his mother!

He had been robbed of her love, her purity, her essence for so many years and while he could not recall all his memories of her, the way she made him feel, the emotions she stirred from him so easily at that moment were undeniable.

He wanted to crawl into her lap and weep. He wanted to feel her arms around him. He wanted...No. No he couldn't want that. He couldn't want any of that. It didn't matter what she was, who she was, he was no longer that little boy. No longer a child, but a man, a man who was a mongrel, and a pet for a Blondie. Too much had happened, he had gone too far to ever go back. He had done shameful things, horrible things. He could no longer be the child of this woman, the son of this Queen.

She took another step towards him, her arms outstretched and watched him stumble backwards into Iason, who quickly steadied him.

"Don't," he croaked, startled at the sound of his own voice. He didn't even know what he was saying! Don't touch him? Don't look at him? Don't be a Queen? Don't be his mother? Don't be real? Don't make this nightmare he was having even more horrible.

"Don't?" she repeated kindly.

"You...shouldn't." Riki felt ashamed because of who and what he was, and how he had lived his life until this moment.

"I must. I thought you dead. I thought you lost to me forever and I too wished for death. Now here you stand before me and you would deny me the chance to touch my own son?"

"I...I'm not that boy. I'm not your son." Oh God! Oh God, this couldn't be real. This beautiful, smiling and regal woman could not be the mother of a mongrel, of a pet. It wasn't right! It wasn't fair! Oh fuck no!

"You are not that boy, you are a man, but you are my son."

She stepped forward again Riki looked up, panicked, into piercing blue eyes. He did not protest when Iason stepped in front of him and for the first

time in his life, Riki willingly hid behind someone. Her presence had turned him into a coward, as he gripped the Blondie's shirt and pressed his face against it. He could not let her touch him, he would absolutely lose it if she touched him.

"Leave us," Iason demanded.

Instead of the disgust and outrage the King had shown towards Iason, the Queen's lips twitched in the smallest smile. "Do you truly think you can keep a mother from her son? You have much to learn about Humans, Blue Eyes."

Both Riki and Iason blinked in surprise.

"Riki does not wish me to hurt anyone, but I will do what I must."

She stared at him for a full minute before nodding. "As will I, as his mother. I wanted to give you more time to adjust to being home, Ciel...."

"R...Riki. My name is...Riki." Shame engulfed him and he couldn't even understand why. Riki the Dark. Riki the Mongrel. Pet to a Blondie, that was who he was, not her son. Not *her* son.

She paused, and once again her reaction was unlike that of her husband. "Riki," she said softly. "That is a handsome name and befits you. I will call you Riki, if that is your preference, then what will you call me?"

Riki stepped behind Iason again and remained silent.

"I see. Disappointing." She turned towards the door and exchanged a look with the guards. "It appears your Queen must wait." She took a step towards the door and instantly collapsed.

"Mama!" The unfamiliar word tore past Riki's lips and his body was already moving before his brain could comprehend why. He darted past Iason and caught her in his arms, but her dead weight also pulled him to the floor with her.

“Now I have you!” Her arms were around Riki in an instant, and the mongrel was too shocked to respond. “My sweet boy.”

“P...Please let go.” The scent of her, the feel of her arms...Oh God. It was all so familiar, so good that tears stung his eyes.

“No. I shall never let you go again, my dear boy.” Her soft lips brushed his cheek, even as she cheekily glanced up at Iason. “Blue Eyes may rip me limb from limb, but my arms will remain around you, though my head and body be detached.” She shuddered mockingly. “Perhaps not my most glamorous appearance.”

Riki stared at her appalled. “He...he wouldn’t do that!” Even before the words were out of his mouth, Iason had stepped towards them and the guards instantly raised their weapons at him.

The Queen spoke a word that Riki did not understand, but the command in her voice was unmistakable. The guards immediately lowered their weapons and stepped back.

The Queen gave Riki one final squeeze, then released him and extended a regal jeweled hand to Iason. “Help an old woman up, Blue Eyes.”

Iason caught her hand and did as he was asked. “I see no old woman here.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“My name is Iason. May we have yours?”

“You will not take liberties with the Queen!” One of the guards insisted and again raised his weapon, only to have the woman he was protecting flick her hand at him and his weapon was suddenly across the room.

“I apologize for my guards, they can be uncivilized at times,” the Queen announced, as if she had not just single-handedly disarmed a man twice her size. “You may call me Celestia.” She smiled at Riki who had crossed his arms in front of his chest defensively. “And *you* already know what to call me.”

Iason was both alarmed and amused when a dark pink tinged Riki's cheeks, but he was far more interested in how the Queen had managed to throw the guard's weapon when they had not been near enough for her to touch it.

"Whatever," he retorted, seeing her be nice to Iason had relieved some of the stress of his situation, and made room for his usual stubbornness to return. "I don't appreciate being kidnapped..."

"Kidnapped?" Celestia said as the guard discretely moved to retrieve the weapon he lost. "We did not kidnap you; we merely brought you back where you belong."

"I don't belong here!"

"Oh but you do."

"No, I fucking don't!"

"I don't know what fucking means, but I have an idea it isn't very polite."

"No, it isn't," Iason agreed. This woman seemed reasonable. Perhaps they could use her to get back to Amoï. He could use her love for Riki to manipulate her into...

"No, you can't."

Iason glanced down at her. "Pardon me?"

"You hope that I'll help you get back to your own planet, but I won't do that." She reached up and tapped Iason's cheek. "I have no desire to lose my son a second time, but I understand your need to try."

"Are you telepathic?" Iason inquired, curious and Celestia smiled.

"I have no need of such things, your intent is written across your face."

"That is a falsehood. I showed you no such indication."

“I am a Queen, my very tall friend, I deal with all manner of politicians, swindlers, peddlers and courtiers. I do not need to read minds to read people.”

Riki stepped forward. “But you could help us escape, if you wanted to, right?”

“Escape?” A flicker of hurt entered the Queen’s eyes, but was gone a moment later. “This is your home, Riki. We are your family.”

“That’s not possible!” he cried, turned away and stalked to the window. “It *can’t* be possible.”

The Queen slowly moved to the window beside him, but did not attempt to touch him. “I understand you are confused and upset...” she began.

“You don’t understand! You don’t understand anything!” He turned on her then, enraged that this was happening and that she was forcing him to hurt her. “I don’t know you! I don’t want to know you. I belong on Amoï, that is my home, that is where I’m from. I’m just a mongrel from Ceres, so you don’t get it! I can’t be a Prince. I can’t be your son. You’re wrong!”

Celestia regarded him for a long moment, focusing on the way his hands twitched and his body trembled. Moisture clung to his long lashes, even as he tried to hide it from her. She took a deep breath, released it.

“Leave us,” she told the guards.

“Sarnee, the King has ordered...”

“Leave us.” Her tone was deeper, darker than before and the guards quickly bowed and obeyed. When she turned to Iason, her voice had turned soft again. “They are just outside the door, you will be unable to leave.”

Iason simply nodded.

“You are a mongrel from Ceres,” she said to Riki. “But you are also a Prince.”

“No...” Riki began but she continued, cutting him off.

“You are a Prince, who was taken from his home and forced to grow up as a mongrel,” she insisted. “I was a mage from Turna who had been sold into the games, forced to fight and kill just to get enough food to survive another day.” She stared down at her hands. “There is blood on my hands that will never be erased and shame on my soul that shall never be forgiven.”

Riki’s gaze also moved to her hands, of their own will.

“I was no better than a beast, and then one day a stranger came to the games. He watched as I defeated my opponent and requested a meeting. I walked to him, covered in another’s blood and he asked me one question.”

“What question?”

“Do you wish to be forgiven?”

Riki stared at her, confused.

“He was the only one out of the thousands that had watched the games who understood the depth of my sin, the darkness of a life I could not escape from. I did not wish to kill, but I had been trained to do so. Only he had sensed my despair, my sorrow for the act I had no control over.”

“So...he forgave you?”

“No.” The Queen smiled wistfully. “He offered me a chance to forgive myself and to atone for my sins. He purchased me from my owner and brought me here to Avalon.”

“And he took you as his Queen,” Riki sneered, unwilling to show how much her story had touched him. “Sounds like you just traded owners.”

“Perhaps it does, but I did not immediately become a Queen, Riki. Nathaniel freed me the moment we landed here and initially helped me find work cleaning up after the animals and preparing meals for the poor. After a while, it became known I could fight, so I was recruited by the Knights. I was an excellent fighter, but I no longer had to kill to survive. I found honor

in being a warrior I instead of shame, and soon I became the Captain of the King's guard. It wasn't until many cycles had passed that Nathaniel and I became lovers."

"So a rich, powerful King gave you fairy tale ending, big deal. I live in the real world, not..."

"Nathaniel was not a King when I met him, he was a merchant."

Riki blinked in surprise. "Then...then how?"

"The old King died and had no heirs. His death was sudden and so he had not the time to proclaim a successor."

"So...Did he kill someone to be King, or something?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. There is an ancient rite that is passed down through the centuries that can give the power of the King. Nathaniel passed the rite and has been ruling ever since."

"It doesn't matter." Riki shook his head and moved away from the window. "You have your...your world and your fairy tale so you don't need me. I don't belong here. I can't be King."

"You will be King, Riki, but that is not why we brought you home. We brought you home because we love you."

"You don't even know me!" Riki snapped. "You know nothing about me!"

"Then tell me. Speak of your time away, of your life on this planet of Amoï. I am eager to hear of it."

"You...no. You don't want to hear it, trust me."

"You've had a difficult time?"

Riki snorted in derision. She had no fucking idea.

"Is there nothing good you can tell me? Is there no joy in your life at all?"



“No, there fucking isn’t! I hate my life! I hate what it’s made me. You abandoned me, you left me all alone and nothing you do or say will ever change that! I fucking hate you all!”

“Riki.”

Riki glanced at Iason, saw the hurt in his pale blue eyes and immediately wished he could take back his harsh words. “Iason, I...”

“I...I am sorry, Riki,” Iason said as his eyes closed and he felt his body falling. He could no longer fight the sleep. “I’m sorry.”

“Iason!” Riki tried to catch the Blondie but he was far too heavy, and Iason landed hard on the floor with a thud.

“What is it?” the Queen demanded as she also crouched beside the unconscious android. “What is wrong with him?”

“Iason?” Riki shook Iason. “Iason!”

“Guards!” The Queen rose as they entered the room. “Bring him to the bed.”

The men set down their weapons and, with some difficulty, moved Iason onto the platform bed.

“Is it dead?” one of them asked as he stepped back and retrieved his rifle.

“Shut up!” Riki climbed onto the bed and continued to shake Iason. “Wake up. I didn’t fucking mean it! You know I didn’t mean it. Wake up! Please!” He leapt towards one of the guards and despite the man being larger than him, had him pinned against the wall in seconds. “What did you do to him? What did you fucking do?”

Celestia put a firm hand on Riki’s shoulder. “They did nothing, they were outside the room.”

He turned on her. “Then you did it! What did you do to him? Wake him up. Wake him up right...” He paused as a thought occurred to him. Was Iason

unconscious or was he asleep? Asleep. Shit! Junpin, the time of joining. “Oh no.” He returned to the bed and peered down at the still android. “You can’t do this now. You can’t!”

“What is it?” The Queen asked. “What can we do to help?”

“I...I don’t know.” He didn’t know enough about it to know what to do. Would Iason just sleep for the next twenty-four hours? No, there had to be more to it than that or they wouldn’t require Jupiter. Why didn’t Iason remind him? Why didn’t he tell him what to do?

“Is he ill?”

“No. I mean...I don’t know.” What did Jupiter do to the elites when they were in seclusion? Was it maintenance, or something that was absolutely required to sustain them? Would Iason die if he didn’t join with Jupiter during this time? What the hell was he supposed to do about this?

“Riki?” Celestia again touched his arm. “I will have our physicians look at him.”

“No!” He didn’t think a Human doctor could do anything for Iason, but nor did he want anyone poking and prodding Iason. What if they decided to experiment on him during this time. “Just go away. Please just go away.”

The Queen dropped her hand and sighed. “Very well. I will return later with some food.”

“Don’t bother,” Riki snarled, and then realized that he was literally biting the hand that fed him. With Iason down he had only himself to depend on. He spun around and caught her hand as she turned away. “Help me.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I need to get him home. He needs to be back on Amoi. He can’t stay here.”

The Queen’s gaze softened. “Riki, you know I cannot...”

“Please! I’ll stay here with you, but he has to go back!”

“You will stay and stop fighting your father?”

“I...” Did that mean she wanted him to completely give up on his old life? To accept becoming a Prince. “I....I’ll seriously consider it. I’ll listen to what you have to tell me, I’ll try and...and deal with it, but you have to promise that you’ll return him to Amoï unharmed.”

“Are you willing to trust us to do this?”

“No,” he admitted honestly. “There was another person with us when we came here. I trust her, so find her and bring her here then they can both leave.”

Celestia reached a hand forward and caressed Riki’s cheek, watched him flinch from her, then force himself to accept it. “You care for him so much?” she asked, surprised.

“He can’t die. Please.”

She nodded. “I will speak to the King and see what can be done? What does this woman look like?”

Riki gave her a description of Carrie, then remembered the transformation he had witnessed. She wouldn’t still be like that would she? No, probably not and he didn’t want to reveal all Carrie’s secrets to these people.

“I will return,” The Queen said as she turned in a swirl of fabric and strode towards the chamber door. A guard held it open for her, then closed it again and resumed his position in front of it.

Riki climbed up on the bed again and continued to awaken Iason.

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“So,” The King said as he stared at the tall, lanky Human before him. “I will hear your reason for trespassing in the Royal gardens in such a lewd state, and then decide your punishment.”

“Bite me,” Guy retorted.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Bite. Me.”

One of the guards hit Guy in the back and the blow knocked him to his knees, especially as his hands were tied behind his back.

He sneered up at the guard. “You hit like a girl.” He didn’t even flinch when the guard raised his hand again, but a word from the King had the guard stepping back.

“We are not ruffians,” The King reminded. “Get him up, for Mighty’s sake.”

The guards hefted Guy back onto his feet.

“What is your planet of origin?”

“I move around a lot,” Guy retorted.

Nathaniel rose. “Do not test my patience, foreigner. I will do no harm to those who are undeserving, but I can throw you into a pit so dark that you will never again remember the feel of sunlight on your face.”

“Is that a threat?”

“What is your business on Avalon?”

“I came to find a friend.”

“Who is this friend?”

“Riki the Dark.”

There was a flicker of surprise in the King’s eyes but then it was gone again. “Is this someone attending the festival?”

“I don’t know anything about a festival; I’m just here to get my friend back.”

“And you believed that running naked through my gardens would get this person’s attention?”

“No, but it got your attention, and since you’re the one holding Riki, I figure you’re the man to talk to.”

“There is no one here by that name. Now, I shall forgive your transgression, as it was your first offence, and I will have my people escort you back to your ship where you will be...”

Guy chuckled. “That will be fun, since I came here on one of your ships.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw you taking my friend and I hitched a ride. Now give me back Riki and we’ll both be happy to get off your precious planet.”

“You are from Amoï.”

“Got it in one.”

“You have wasted a trip, regardless of which ship you travelled upon.” He waived a hand at the guards. “See him to a transport and make sure it is one that is leaving within the hour.”

The guards reached for Guy and he easily broke his bonds with the strength of his mechanical hand, elbowed one of the guards where their face would be, then swiftly crouched and swept the legs out from the second one.

“Seize him!”

Four more guards were suddenly upon him, just as an alarm klaxon sounded from somewhere in the castle

“What now?” The King demanded, they were already experiencing multiple black outs through the castle, had experience two fires in the kitchens and

now another issue?

A page ran in, breathlessly. “Sarrum, all the doors on the stables have been unlocked. The animals are running wild!”

“How could they all be unlocked at once?” The stables were vast and the doors were coded to open individually at the request of a rider or attendant.

“A...a mechanical g...glitch perhaps?” The young boy offered.

“Find Jethro and have him gather as many people as he can to corral them.” Daniel rose and stepped down to walk to where Guy was being firmly held by three guards, two on either side of him and one behind. “Is this your doing?”

Guy just smiled. “If you don’t want to see this place in ruins, I’d suggest you take me to Riki.”

“No, I think not.” The King nodded to one of the other guards, standing apart. “Throw him in the dungeon and...”

“My love!”

Everyone turned to watch the majestic woman entering the hall. She walked to the King and he took her hand, kissed it.

“I am pleased to see you, but now is not the time...”

“Does this man know our son?”

“He says he does.”

“Then bring him to Ciel, you and I have something to discuss.”

“My dear, let us not make rash decisions...”

“This is the time to decide our son’s future. Would you deny me an audience on such an important matter?”

“Of course not, however this man has been sabotaging....”

“I haven’t done a thing!” Guy protested, turning on his full charm. “I’m just an innocent bystander, worried for my friend.”

The Queen shot him a look that would freeze meat and Guy actually withered a little bit. “Do not try to play me, child. I will have you flayed over an open spit if you cause any further trouble.” To the King, she said. “Let him go to Ciel, it will make the boy more agreeable and the guards can keep an eye on them both if they are in the same room. I have an offer from our son and you must hear it if this is ever to be resolved.”

The King nodded, trusting that if his wife deemed this so important he would listen. “Do it,” he said to the guards then, tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and started towards his private rooms. “We shall discuss the offer, my Queen.”

“Thank you, My King.”

## Chapter 22

### Summary for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long sabbatical, unfortunately I have been very ill and unable to write. I appreciate your patience and hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you very much for all the reviews I received on the last one, they were the one thing that made me smile during this time. Your support means so very much!

Katze lands on Avalon and Iason faces the darkness

Katze shut down his ship in the docking port that he had been assigned, and took a deep breath. Just the short flight from his entry through the atmosphere to the landing bays had shown him breath-taking views of green trees, golden fields and an expanse of ocean, ponds and waterfalls. Avalon was a stunning planet. It was so very different from the stark deserts of Amoï.

Switching on his com panel, he sent a sub-space message to Cal, but did not anticipate an answer for it was still a few hours before dawn there. The signal for an incoming message was almost instantaneous, and he wondered if Cal had slept next to the console?

“Katze!” Relief filled Cal’s young face before he quickly schooled his features into his usual neutral expression. “You arrived safely?”

“Yeah, more or less.” He had been unable to sleep on the ride over, and was physically and emotionally exhausted, but one thing being Iason Mink’s Furniture was to push past such feelings and just get the job done. “Did you find anything we can use?”

“Well, there is a plant that is used for medicine and I did find some logs of them importing it on occasion, however they haven’t had any for some time. We may be able to use the offer of supplying them with it to bargain for Master Iason and Riki.”



“A plant? On Amoï?” Almost all the foliage on Amoï was imported or synthesized.

“No, it doesn’t grow here, but it does on Gangu. I have already spoken with their trades administrator and they are willing to give us as much as we need.”

“And what do they want in return?”

“Three thousand pulse coils for their mining droids, they can’t manufacture them there and the place they were getting them from no longer offers them.”

“Three thousand?” Raoul shifted through his list of contacts in his mind, since they couldn’t contact Iason or Raoul to arrange the trade personally. “Call Aaron in Sector five, contact code 33YT67-06G. He’ll know where to get them, though it will be tight getting that many. Tell him you are working for me and this is a rush job.”

Cal nodded. “Yes. I’ll do so as soon as we disconnect.”

“Any word from Raoul?”

“No.”

Katze didn’t think there would be. “How’s the kid?”

“Who?”

“What’s his name...Spirt? Ghost?”

A small smile appeared on Cal’s lips, before he caught it. “Anjell. He is well, anxious as to what will happen when he goes home, but Raoul told him to stay here so here he stays.”

“Yeah, well, Raoul will sort it out. Just stay inside, we still don’t know who tried to take you.”

“I am fine, but yes we will stay out of sight.”

“Right. I’m probably gonna be out of contact for a while, but I’ll use that offer if I have no other choice. After you contact Aaron, try and get some sleep, okay?”

“I couldn’t sleep at a time like this, I am far too worried.”

“Well, try anyway. Take a relaxer if you have too. I’ll need you alert and conscious when I get back.”

Cal nodded. “Do be careful, Katze. And please bring them home safely if you can.”

“I’ll do my best. Out.”

Katze grabbed his satchel, slung on his jacket and set the homing beacon on the ship. That way if things did not go according to plan, at least Raoul would be able to track him when he came out of seclusion.

Opening the hatch, he slowly walked down the ramp and noticed that at least he wasn’t the only ‘alien’ here. The port was flooded with several ships and different kinds of species. He had been off world a few times with Iason and in fact, it was Iason who had insisted he learn to fly, but he had never seen a world like this. So green and lush and prosperous, it was a stark contrast to Amoï.

He fell in with the crowd moving towards the square structure several feet away from the docking ports. Based on Cal’s information that Riki may have been abducted by the Royal Family, he would need to find out where they were and go from there.

All visitors were subjected to a security scan, which he passed because he had no dangerous goods on him, and the weapons he did have would not be detected by such scans. He was subjected to a pat down, and yet another line where his bag was thoroughly searched.

It seemed like a little overkill, just to get off the platforms, especially for what seemed like a bit of a backwater planet, but when he finally stepped out into the glorious sunshine of Avalon, he couldn’t help but gasp.

The security building was built into the side of a mountain, and from its vantage point, he could see for miles. The town, or city he supposed, as it was large and spread out, apparently consisted of three massive circles. In the outer circle, was a bustling market place, with sturdy buildings, carts with wide fabric awnings and the scent and sound of mild industry. There were no sparking towers of glass, no condos, no blinking billboards or street droids loudly hawking their wares.

The second circle appeared to hold homes that were simple but sturdy, and not built too closely together, so that everyone seemed to have a little piece of land to call their own. Some of the houses were as high as three stories but no more. A stone wall surrounded this inner residential circle and the very inside area, surrounded by an even higher wall, sat the towering stone structure nestled among impossibly tall trees and fields of colourful flowers.

Fields of color spread out from the edge of farthest outer-rimmed dwelling, glowing with green, red, gold, and orange. Katze realized that they were crops; food that the city were growing and these fields extended for miles and miles bordered by orchards that held tall fruit filled trees.

“Wow,” he whispered, awed by the sight of so much natural food.

“ ‘Ay...yu walkin’ ur whet?’ ”

Katze glanced down at the tiny dark skinned woman behind him. “Pardon me?”

“Look letar, walk now.”

“Oh, yes, sorry.” He hurried to catch up with the others that had started down a long path of stairs and disappeared into another structure. When he stepped out the other structure there was another line of people waiting for some sort of massive cart on a very thin looking line.

As they got closer, he saw that people were stepping into one of the carts and loading their belongings in another. Katze watched, horrified as the carts suddenly dropped off the side of the mountain and zipped along that wire to the bottom. He stumbled backwards.

“On yu’ll get?”

“On that?” he demanded, feeling truly frightened for the first time since becoming a Furniture. “I can’t get on that! How is that safe? What if the cable snaps? What if we fall out of the cart? What if...” His words were cut off as the tiny woman grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the cart with the others. “Wait! No! Let me off!”

He closed his eyes and tried not to scream as his stomach suddenly dropped out of his body and surged into his chest, then his head. “Fuuuuuuuuuuuccccccckkkkkkkk!”

Suddenly the hideous movement stopped and as he opened one eyes he saw that people were calmly exiting the cart. He stumbled out, moved to the side, away from the others and promptly vomited. He had seen and done some frightening and abnormal things working for Iason Mink, but nothing had been as shaken him as badly as that horrific ride.

“There- there.”

A cup of water appeared in front of his face and he glanced up at the small woman.

“Drink. Ride’s harsh on yuh first timers.”

“T...thank you.” He straightened, accepted the cup, took a sip then gulped it down. It was so cold and refreshing, not at all like the water on Amoï. His stomach, while not instantly settled, calmed to a manageable level and he handed the cup back to her. “I’m here to see the royal family. Do you know where I can find them?”

The woman turned and pointed to the centre of the three circles where the massive stone structure stood. How odd. Even in Amoï, the Elite lived in Eos, a separate section from everyone else, but these leaders appeared to have set themselves in the dead center of the entire city, surrounded by the common folk.

“Thank you.” He cleared his throat and started towards the boarder of the city with the other visitors.

He followed the crowd along the smooth road, past tall cornfields and expansive apple orchards and through the gates of the first circular wall. It was a beehive of activity here, women and men and even young children hawking their wares in firm, loud voices.

“Fish! Fine fresh Fish for sale, only two coins a piece!”

“Fresh herbs for your feasts! Finest quality at only a sixpence a packet!”

“Get your apples here, lovelies! Only Four coins a basket!” The woman at the apple stall smiled at Katze as he paused to look at the red, delicious fruits in awe. She tossed him one and he barely caught it. “On the house for the cute ones!” she winked. “Tell your friends and bring ‘em back, ducky!”

Katze caught the treat by instinct and stared at it, wondered how he was supposed to eat it. His confusion must have shown, for a young boy stopped beside him and reached up for the fruit.

“Like this, Gov,” he said cheekily and took a large bite. He grinned, handed the apple back and scampered off.

Katze stared at the white inside of the apple, then slowly did as the boy had and took a bite. It was cool and sweet and the most delicious thing he had ever tasted! A trickle of juice slid down his chin and he quickly wiped it off and glanced around to see if anyone was watching him, but there weren’t. No one treated him as an outsider, or an alien. Most of these people were human, only their skin was darker, but there were lighter skinned humans as well in the crowd, along with some non-humanoids.

“So trusting,” he muttered as he continued on, taking bites of his apple until he had gotten to the core and then tossed it because the core did not taste as good.

\*\*\*\*\*

*No one knows what it's like  
To be the bad man  
To be the sad man  
Behind blue eyes*

Jupiter.

It is so dark here, so quiet.

Katze? Where is that boy? Was it not time for dinner? Iason's eyes opened and immediately glowed in the pitch darkness to provide a beam of light from which to see. He stood? Rose? Floated upward and moved? Swam? Slid stealthily forward, searching for human contact. There was no temperature gage here, it was neither hot nor cold. No sounds to listen too, no voices, no droids, no traffic, just...silence

He continued to move forward, as he tried to reason where he was and why. There was something he was supposed to be doing, but he could not recall what it was. Something he was searching for, what was it? Who was it?

A corridor appeared before him and ran along both sides to produce identical golden doors that rose all the way up, to where he could no longer see the end of them. A way out of this place? An exit from the quiet? But wait, he was here for a reason. What was the reason? Why could he not recall how he had come here and what his purpose was here?

Curious, he moved to the left and opened the first door? Last door? Only door?

*No one knows what it's like  
To be hated*

***To be fated  
To telling only lies***

*‘What is it?’*

*“It’s one of those artificials.”*

*“It looks different from the others.”*

*“Is it male or female?”*

*“Who knows? No one real looks like that. You can tell it’s a machine. I think it’s ugly.”*

*“It scares me.”*

*Iason opened his eyes and stared through the translucent chamber at the three Human workers, watched their skin change color to a very pale white.*

*“It’s awake! Run!”*

*Wait, he wanted to say, but he had not learned to use his voice yet. He had been enjoying listening to their discussion, although some of their words had made him feel odd. It was lonely in here by himself all the time.. His brothers had already been processed and were outside of this room, but Jupiter insisted he needed more work.*

*The only people he saw were the cleaners, and while he could technically see through the lids that sometimes covered his eyes, he had wanted to open them this time so they would see him looking at them.*

*‘Why do they run away?’ he asked Jupiter in his mind. ‘Why are they afraid of me?’*

*‘Because you are unique.’*

*“Incorrect. I am as my brothers are.”*

*'Incorrect. You are unique. Your looks are comparable to your brothers, there are no further similarities.'*

*'Query?'*

*'Yes?'*

*'Why am I unique?'*

*Silence.*

*'Jupiter?'*

*'You will learn to embrace it, in time.'*

*Iason considered what the Humans had said, that he didn't look normal, that he was frightening and artificial.*

*'I do not wish to be unique.'*

*'You cannot help but be what you are.'*

*'You are wrong. I will choose who I will be.'* Expecting a reprimand for contradicting Jupiter, Iason felt surprise for the first time when his creator said.

*'That is why you are unique.'*

***But my dreams  
They aren't as empty  
As my conscience seems to be***

*"You there."*

*The Human turned towards him and Iason watched the man tremble.*

*"Are you ill?" he demanded, instead of asking the question he had planned to.*



*“N...No, Sir.”*

*“Then why do you shake?”*

*“I...I’m sorry, Sir.” Iason watched the man try to stop and fail, and then he watched a dark stain appear just below the fellow’s groin. Had this Human just wet himself?*

*“You are not well. Come I will take you...”*

*“No!” The man stumbled back and fell on his ass and started to cry. “P... please don’t kill me!”*

*Kill him? Iason was trying to help him. “Why do you believe I will hurt you?”*

*“E...everyone knows that you kill Humans for sport if they do not please you.”*

*“Where did you hear such lies?”*

*“F...From the other Blondies. They said you injured a servant because he did not bring you your drink quickly enough.” The man was so scared he started to ramble and reveal all in what appeared to be a desperate attempt to save himself. “And everyone knows you killed that woman in the Central Offices!”*

*Iason’s eyes flashed red, and he turned in a flash of cloth to walk away from the sniffling Human. He watched others give him a wide birth and hated them for it. Useless. Unforgiving. Arrogant! He stepped into a portal that brought him to the floor where his office was and stormed down it.*

*The servant had been an accident, as had the woman. He had been trying to help them and had not realized his own strength. It was so long ago, when he was still so new and naive. How could his brothers propagate such lies?*

*He entered his office and found two Blondies waiting for him. Immediately he wondered if they had been the ones who had betrayed him, who had instilled such fear in the Humans against him.*

*“We have been waiting, Iason,” Orphe stated. “Did you not recall our...”*

*“Get out.”*

*“I beg your pardon?”*

*“GET OUT! Iason screamed at them and swiped the items off the desk in a fit of anger, startling the other two Blondies in the room with him.*

*“You really must get a reign on that temper, Iason,” Orphe tossed as he and the other Blondie turned and left, closing the door behind them.*

*Iason dropped down into his chair and slid his hands into his hair. Was there no one he could trust? Was there no one he could count on? Were his brother’s right and he was letting his emotions ruin him? All he wanted was respect and perhaps a little kindness.*

*“Is it so much to ask?” he muttered to himself.*

*‘Do not ask for their respect, demand it. Force it from them. Rule them.’*

*“Yes.” Iason said to Jupiter’s words in his mind, as he straightened and pushed down his turbulent emotions. Fear could also work in his favor. If they wished to fear him, to run away he would oblige them, however he to ensure that no one would readily betray him again, he would force them to submit. He would crush any who went against him.*

***I have hours, only lonely  
My love is vengeance  
That's never free***

*Iason glanced down as a tiny object ran into his legs. A little pink skinned humanoid, how quaint, he thought as he picked the smiling toddler up.*

*“Oh, please excuse me!” A woman with skin that matched her daughter’s rushed up. “She got away from me! We’re just here for a visit, I am so very sorry.”*

*Iason's eyes narrowed at the sudden fear in the woman's eyes, so typical, then he turned his attention to the girl in his arms as she wrapped her fingers around his long hair. He was startled by her trust and lack of fear and briefly considered taking her home with him. She was very cute, with her little nose and large grey eyes that were far too big for her face. He squeezed her, and approved of the softness.*

*"P...please sir?" the woman said again, when Iason did not return her child right away.*

*"How old is this child?"*

*"J...Just four cycles, Sir."*

*Hmmmm...She would be quite beautiful once she reached puberty, and he felt a flicker of something, lust, perhaps? Arousal? Intriguing, although he wasn't sure if he could get used to the pink skin. Something different indeed. He could see her curled up at the end of his bed, or at his feet as he relaxed with a glass of wine. The more he thought of it, the calmer he felt and an idea came to him. He could get quite a price for her on the Black Market. Yes, a very good price, but perhaps she was still too young. Perhaps when she was older, not quite an adult, but not this young either. Ten or eleven would make a good grooming age, and then....Then the prospect of what that sort of companion could offer excited him. A servant? No...a pet. A Human pet for the Elite. Yes...it could work.*

*When the woman interrupted his thoughts again, he reluctantly nodded and carefully pulled his hair away from the girl's grip. "Midas is no place for a child," he told the woman as he handed over the girl to her mother. "I suggest you keep her close to you and away from the locals, or you may find yourself childless."*

*The woman hugged her little girl, horrified. "W...what do you mean?"*

*"Keep her out of sight." Iason tapped the girl's nose with a gloved finger, almost smiled when she gripped his finger with her tiny hand. "Such a cute thing."*

*The woman started to walk away, but the girl squirmed in her arms to be set down. Once on her feet the girl darted back to Iason and as he crouched before her, she offered him a piece of round, wrapped candy from her pocket.*

*“For me?” he asked surprised.*

*She giggled and nodded.*

*He accepted the candy. “Thank you.”*

*The girl ran back to her mother, who firmly took her hand and hurried away. The child turned back just long enough to wave at Iason, and he found himself waving back. He stared down at the candy, it was the first act of kindness he had ever received*

***No one knows what it's like***

***To feel these feelings***

***Like I do***

***And I blame you***

*“Iason, have you destroyed another pet?”*

*“He is not destroyed, he can still function.” The pet functioned well enough while being fucked by three others, and yet the scene had done almost nothing to stimulate Iason.*

*“You are too hard on them.”*

*“No. They are too weak for me.”*

*“They are for pleasure, Iason. Why must you do this?” Raoul sighed down at the battered and broken child on the bed.*

*“I found no pleasure with that one.” Which of course meant that the pet itself must be faulty. He had experienced a mild twinge of guilt as he had beaten the boy, but as he had learned to do, he pushed it down and replaced it with anger. This was his right. His will was law.*

*“This is your third this year.”*

*“What of it?”*

*Raoul nodded to the cleaners. “Take him to my lab and I will repair and redistribute him.”*

*The two men nodded, picked up the naked, unconscious child and walked out of the condo, but not before Iason noticed the look of disgust one of the men shot him. Humans often found him distasteful, and he was used to such side-long glances and sly looks from them. Such stupid, inferior creatures, always afraid of what they do not, cannot understand. He had long ago surpassed his momentary weakness of wanting them to like him. He would never fall into that trap again.*

*“I have some new stock that you may find heartier and more to your tastes...”*

*Iason waved his hand. “No. They all bore me. I do not want another.”*

*“You need something as an outlet, my friend. You do nothing but work.”*

*“I enjoy work and as you claim I keep breaking my pets, is it not better that I refrain from having one?”*

*“I suppose. I will keep my eye open for something better for you.”*

*“Do that.”*

*Iason watched Raoul leave and then turned his attention to Darryl, as the boy pulled the bloodied sheets from the bed. At least he could depend on Darryl to do things properly. This last pet had no spark about him. Watching the boy masturbate had bored him. Watching him gasp and cry and moan as he fornicated with others also held little appeal. The sounds, the sights, they were the same as every other pet he’d had ever had, every one he had seen at the pet parties. There was nothing new, nothing exciting.*

*“I am doomed to a life of monotony and drudgery.”*

*“Pardon me, Sir?”*

*“Nothing. When you are finished here, have the car brought around. I have some business in Midas to attend to.”*

*“Yes Sir.”*

***No one bites back as hard  
On their anger  
None of my pain and woe  
Can show through***

*“Please! I won’t do it again! Please!”*

*“No, you won’t do it again, ever. I will make very sure of that.”*

*“Let me come. Please, let me come.”*

*“Not yet. You have not learned your lesson.” He slid a gloved finger into the mongrel’s anus, and was thrilled at how stimulating such a simple act was for him. Normally it was taboo to touch a pet in a sexual way, but his other pets had held no spice for him, and this one...this one had begged to be touched from their very first meeting, and so he had, and found a new and arousing past time.*

*“Iason...Please! I...I’ll do anything!”*

*“Yes, you will. You will do anything I tell you, won’t you pet?”*

*“Yes!”*

*“But what about when the drugs wear off? Once you receive your release will you go back to fighting me?”*

*The mongrel was silent.*

*“Of course you will and that is what makes it so exciting.” He slid another finger in, then a third, and finally used his other hand to grasp the boy’s cock. “Is this what you want, pet? You cannot come until I tell you. If you do, I will make this go on for days. Do you understand?”*

*“Y...yes. P...please...”*

*Iason stroked the long, delicious looking cock as he thrust his fingers in and out of the pet’s hole. Pre-cum dribbled from the tip of the mongrel’s cock, and Iason saw the veins in the boy’s neck pop out as he struggled to obey the order. A single tear slid down the boy’s face and blood appeared at the corner of his lower lip where he had chomped down hard with his teeth.*

*“You may come, pet.”*

*It was almost instantaneous, the flood of white liquid that ejaculated from the pet’s cock, and a cry so guttural and savage and so incredibly sublime tore from the mongrel’s throat. Iason felt his own pleasure peek at almost the same instant, though he had no seed to spill, the ferocity of the sensation shocked him. He had felt stimulation with other pets, and had received satisfaction from watching them, to a degree, but he had never experienced something this intense. Was this an orgasm?*

*He slid his hand through the dark hair of his sobbing pet. “Very good, Riki.”*

***But my dreams***

***They aren't as empty***

***As my conscience seems to be***

Riki. His pet was Riki! How could he have forgotten? Where was Riki? Why wasn’t Riki here with him? Wait, there was something more to their relationship. Something...unique. Oh Riki, where are you? The mix of agony and pleasure that marred the mongrel’s face immediately aroused Iason, but as he had watched himself torture Riki, he felt not only pleasure, but something else. Regret perhaps? He had never meant to hurt his other

pets, and even now, he did not think on it, but Riki was different. He truly never meant to harm him or put him through so much.

Suddenly he wanted to see Riki, not just a memory of him, but the real flesh and blood man. He moved down the corridor opening doors to his past, searching for the one that would free him from this place and lead him to the man he loved. However, each door opened up only to memories that were no longer even real to him.

He grew frantic as the memories seemed to regress to a time well before Riki, memories of long hours with Jupiter as she refined and defined him. Painful memories of emotions that he could not control, and then worse, having those feelings completely removed. He had been unable to deal with the emptiness, the limits that such a thing imposed, and so he had begged Jupiter to return his emotions. Eventually, he learned to control them.

Now he felt as if they had been ripped away from him again. What had he done to deserve this? Why couldn't he find his way out? Why was no one coming to his assistance? Had that wretched Guy been right, that no one truly cared for him? No, Raoul was his good friend, his only friend, really. Darryl cared, he was a good...no. Darryl was dead. Katze...did Katze...? Had he surrounded himself only by those who worked for him, who feared him?

No, Riki did not fear him. Oh but he did, he had made Riki afraid. Great Jupiter, what was this feeling, this uncertainty and discontentment? Was he dead? Is that why he could not feel anything, why he could not escape? Who had killed him? Where was Riki?

*I have hours, only lonely  
My love is vengeance  
That's never free*

*'I...I'm free?'*



*Iason watched his pet stutter and stumble, and then run. Riki ran from him as if the very hounds of hell were at his back, and Iason was concerned by this. He would collect Riki again, that would not be an issue. Riki would return to him, Riki had often fought him, but the vision of his pet running from him so hard and fast caused another new emotion in him, and he was not sure what it was. He had already experienced such wondrous feelings just by having the mongrel with him, and most of the sensations had been enjoyable. This one was not. This one he hoped never to feel again.*

*He watched Riki until he could no longer see him on the road, as if waiting for the boy to turn back at some point, to change his decision, but Riki just kept running and that horrible sensation inside of him grew more and more profound.*

*Finally, he settled back into his vehicle and stared out the view screen. He believed that Riki required this moment of freedom to truly come to terms to the fact that Riki belonged to him, but watching his pet run, and remembering the hurtful things he had said that afternoon in security cell concerned him. Riki was his, this was simply the way things were, and he was trying to be patient, but the boy only fought against him that much harder.*

*Why Riki understand that when he lashed out, when he ran away it made Iason feel things that he didn't understand. This in turn caused him to lash out in anger or punish Riki for making him feel these things.*

*He directed his vehicle to return to Tanagura, incapable of trusting himself with the operation of the car. His chest hurt, his head hurt and he missed Riki already. He slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out the object he carried everywhere with him. The foil wrapper was still as brightly colored as the day he had received it, though the treat inside could obviously no longer be consumed. He curled his fingers around the candy and wondered why Riki couldn't understand that they were meant to be together? Why couldn't Riki love him?*

***No One knows what it's like to be***

*mistreated to be defeated, behind Blue eyes*

*And no knows how to say*

*that they're sorry and don't worry*

*I'm not telling lies*

*He stood at the bar and studied the sidelong glances he received from the other patrons, some suspicious, most lustful. Watching them watch him was enjoyable, although they could not see him looking because of the dark glasses he wore. Many of them wanted him, but of course, the idea of allowing any Humans to touch him was repulsive. Of course, they were not seeing him as an Elite now, but as a man. It was truly revealing how people reacted based on how one looked.*

*His eyes found Katze who was approaching a thin, waif of a man who looked like he had not bathed in days. Well, this was Ceres, so that was entirely possible, he would need to take a long hot shower for several hours and perhaps spend time in a decontamination chamber when he left this place just to rid himself of the filth.*

*He pulled his gloves tighter as his keen eyes caught sight of a beautiful dark skinned mongrel who was leaning against the wall of the bar, another paler mongrel leaned over him, talking close to his ear to be heard over the noise of the music. Something traded hands, but Iason was more interested in the dark mongrel than whatever shady deal was being struck.*

*The man in front of the dark one continued to block Iason's view, and he started to step towards them so he could physically move the man and get a better look at the mongrel against the wall, but then the corner of his eye caught Katze heading towards the exit with the filthy man he had been speaking with.*

*When he glanced back at the wall he saw that both mongrel's had disappeared, and he found himself feeling annoyed, but then he remembered*

*why he was there and headed for the exit himself.*

*“I don’t understand what the problem is...” The dirty mongrel said turning to Katze in the darkened, back alley of the bar. He glanced up as a tall man with short brown hair and dark glasses approached them. “Hey, who are you?”*

*“It’s me you have to worry about,” Katze reminded as he smacked the man in the side of the head. “Where’s the rest of the money Raggu?”*

*“I told you, they refused to pay full price! I gave you everything they gave me, didn’t even take my cut...”*

*“I think you took your cut. I think you took more than your cut and you better come up with the rest of what you owe me...”*

*Raggu lifted his hands. “Look, I can’t pay what I didn’t get, but let me contact some people and see what I can...Uurkk!”*

*Katze lifted the man up by the shirt. “Sorry, did you think this was a negotiation? My money, or...” He lifted up a data pad. “Your organs, now.”*

*Raggu tried to shove Katze away from him. “You can’t take my organs!” He glanced at the data pad waiting for his fingerprint to legally release his body parts. “I’ll get the money, I swear!” He patted Katze’s chest. “Come on, man, I’ve never steered you wrong before. Just gimme some time...”*

*“See, if it was up to me, I would, really, but it’s not up to me.”*

*“Then...then let me talk to your boss. I’m sure we can work something out!”*

*The stranger with the blue hair moved forward and watched the look of horror that transformed Raggu’s face as he lengthened his hair and turned it back to its usual pale blond.*

*“Do you think you can negotiate with me?”*

*“M...Master Mink. I...I have the money! It’s in this account! I’ll give it to you right now!” Raggu’s hands shook as he pulled out a credit stick. “Take*

*it, take all of it!”*

*Iason coldly plucked the credit stick from the frightened man’s trembling fingers, and slid the stick into his pocket, then nodded to Katze. While Raggu was distracted, Katze grabbed his hand and pressed his thumb to the pad.*

*‘No! NO, I gave you the money! I gave you the money!’*

*“After you tried to hide it from me. Not very smart.” Iason moved aside as a large container droid entered the alley. “There are no second changes, Raggu.”*

*“No. Nooooo!” Raggu tried to struggle as two large metal hands shot out from the container and then pulled him inside. Ragu’s screams were cut off as the droid moved back out of the alley, leaving the two men alone in the alley.*

*“Do you have a problem, Katze?” Iason asked as he noticed the way his former furniture stared at the data pad in his hand.*

*“None, sir,” Katze assured and accepted the credit stick from Iason. “Shall I put this in the Stone account?”*

*“Yes, but make sure to transfer half to your own first.”*

*“Half, Sir?”*

*“You earned it.”*

*Katze nodded. “Yes sir.”*

***But my dreams  
They aren't as empty  
As my conscience seems to be***

***I have hours, only lonely  
My love is vengeance***

## *That's never free*

Iason had grown accustomed to be treated like a monster, different from the other Elites. Everyone only ever looked at him with loathing or fear, but it usually worked to his advantage. When he had asked Jupiter for the ability to change how he looked, She could not comprehend why he would make such a request, when She had created him to be perfect. She could not understand that despite hardening himself against such glares, each look still touched him; each one still burned.

He required a way to walk among others, to conduct business without dealing with such an annoyance. A way to get past the guarded animosity and false esteem of his brothers, against the hatred of the Humans and the lust for power that everyone else openly showed when they looked at him. He needed a way to covertly do what needed to be done, or perhaps he had just needed a break from all the staring.

Only Riki ever looked at him differently. Even upon their first meeting, Riki had not shown fear, but defiance, and then arrogance. Riki had not cared that he was speaking to a Blondie, to *The Blondie*. Riki couldn't be less concerned that he was propositioning the greatly feared Iason Mink, and Iason had found that entire encounter so incredibly freeing.

He had been unable to stop thinking about that encounter, found himself overly preoccupied by it even during work, which was totally unlike him. When he saw Riki again, and the mongrel foolishly decided to follow him he had taken it as a sign that they were meant to be together; that Riki was the pet he had been waiting for.

Riki was strong, proud and argumentative, and even when he looked at Iason with hatred for keeping him captive, Iason need only touch him and those glares turned to desperation, need and passion. Even as Riki fought against his own desire, watching his rebellious war against his desire had inspired and aroused Iason to the point of no return. He knew he would need Riki to stay with him forever, because Riki eased his burden. Riki was

the one person he could trust himself with, be himself with, because Riki was honest about his feelings.

How did he get back to his beloved? Why couldn't he remember what happened to put him in this place? Even as he started to think these thoughts, the doors that he had been searching started to fade away, until there was only darkness once again, a dark so pitch black that even the glow of his eyes could not penetrate.

Riki.

*No one knows what it's like  
To be the bad man  
To be the sad man  
Behind blue eyes*

## Chapter 23

### Summary for the Chapter:

#### Riki and Guy Meet

Riki sighed and pulled away from where he had been trying to shake Iason awake. The Blondie remained dead weight and unresponsive. The Queen had order the guards to remain outside the room, but he was still a prisoner. He couldn't leave the room by the door and all the windows had some sort of seal on them. He couldn't find any locks to jimmy, or reprogram, everything was just sealed as if glued shut. Even the terrace windows were sealed.

He'd kill for a cigarette, but Iason had insisted they be left home before they went to dinner, and then the whole thing with Kirie...Riki shook his head and tried to focus on a means of escape. It was possible to create some sort of diversion to get the guards to come inside the room, he was reasonably sure he could take them down and get away, but where would that leave Iason? He couldn't carry the Blondie. No, he couldn't carry Iason and he *wouldn't* leave him.

Why wasn't he leaving him? This was a serious chance at freedom, to start all over on a brand new planet. To be a Prince instead of a mongrel and a pet. To be able to go wherever he wished without being expected to behave in certain way. Or was that just a fantasy his already confused heart was telling him?

He didn't know these people. Regardless of what they told him, or how they treated him, how could he possibly believe that he would be better off with them than with Iason? For some unknown reason, he felt that he would have even less freedom here than on Amoï, and that concerned him. Something just wasn't right about this whole thing. Was that his heart talking or his head? Was it resentment from being abandoned to live such a horrid existence, or a very real sixth sense of danger?

Was it his pride or his fear that was causing him to lose confidence in himself? He'd never suffered from low self-esteem, there were enough people to look down on him without him being one of them, but here his confidence was definitely shaken. Here, he felt out of his depth, unworthy, dirty and far too much of a risk that anyone, especially a royal family, would want to take a chance on him.

Why was all of this happening to him? Why had he run away from Iason at that stupid restaurant? If he had only listened, if he had obeyed... No, no Iason was *wrong* to do that to Kirie. It didn't matter what the kid had done, nothing warranted having his mind wiped and becoming a sex doll for some perverted Elite.

How could Iason have kept that from him, after all his talk about trust and love and all that shit? Wouldn't he be better off if he did stay here, if he did break with the Blondie if that was as much as Iason's trust got him? The worst part...the very worst part was that he kept thinking, what if he had tried to stand up to Katze when Kirie had been hiding in his apartment closet? What if he hadn't been swayed by Guy's compassion or his own sympathy and had kicked the kid out of his place sooner or...fuck done something, anything else, then maybe Kirie wouldn't be...

He started to pace, his fingers curling and uncurling into fists at his side. Kirie had made his own choices, just as Riki had, when faced with the ultimatum that Iason forced on him anyway. Blaming himself or Iason wouldn't change what had happened, it wouldn't turn Kirie back into the arrogant, stupid kid he was. No, it wouldn't change anything, just as letting himself believe he had a real family, or believe he could stay here and be a Prince or a son would make him anything other than Riki the Dark and the pet of a Blondie.

Still, he had felt shocked, followed by fury and resentment when he faced the man claiming to be his father. While he recognized him in some small way, he experienced no familial feelings towards the King. Shouldn't he? Shouldn't he have an instinctive connection to the man that supposedly fathered him? But there had been none. He felt nothing but mistrust and anger.



However, from the moment he met the Queen he felt something...else. Recognition followed by denial. Joy and then sorrow. Confusion and then peace. None of them had lasted for more than a millisecond, and yet each of them had sliced through him in their own way and when she had held him...

Riki wrapped his own arms around himself and shivered at the memory that was still so fresh. It was like coming home, but to a home that he had never known. The smell of her, the feel of her, the sound of her voice had awakened memories so deep inside of him that even the idea of letting them out had terrified him. And so, he had pushed them away, pushed her away, and he would continue to keep his distance from her and everyone on this fucking planet.

Even if these people were telling the truth, and he was one of them, he would not be manipulated or threatened into being what they wanted. He had fought against that stigma his entire life trying to prove that he wouldn't just be a proper, unworthy Mongrel and remember his place, stay in Ceres and admit that he deserved nothing and would amount to nothing. He had fought for himself and his place, had gained a reputation that made him different than the others.

Then with Iason, he fought against being a captive, fought against being a pet. Always he was fighting his way out of the pit others wanted to keep him in, or in Iason's case, a glass display box, that the Blondie tried to fit him into. He had struggled long and hard against the way Iason could make him lust with just a single touch, or fear with a single look or word. Part of him had given in a little at a time, thinking that it would be easier, that the humiliation would eventually end, or that, at the least, he would find freedom in death, but he was denied even that.

Instead, he continued to get sucked further and further inside Iason Mink's grip, and found himself forming an unreasonable attachment. Iason had used sex to make him dependent physically, but not mentally. Iason had never been able to break his will, and had needed to resort to threatening the only other thing that mattered to Riki other than his freedom; his gang.

It had been a deft, but cruel ultimatum, and one that Riki had not even considered refusing. Iason already owned his body, giving up his soul to the Devil to save his friends...there was no choice really. Byson had been his family, the only family he'd had, so of course he would do anything to save them. Especially Guy who had been like a brother to him.

As always, thinking of his former pairing partner brought both anger and grief and he swiftly buried it again. He couldn't dwell on any of that now. Iason had wormed his way into the heart that Riki believed to be cold and dead inside, and now there was no turning back. The Blondie was his priority now. Getting off this planet and away from these people who couldn't truly want him just as a son or heir should be his only concern.

He couldn't understand their angle. There had to be more to it than just bringing him back into the fold as their Prince or whatever. The way he lived, the way he'd been forced to live gave him no cause to trust them, regardless of what these memories or flashbacks were making him feel. Everyone wanted something more. No one did anything for free, he had learned that the hard way.

He stopped pacing suddenly as the door to the chamber opened and a person was shoved inside. He had been expecting it to be the Queen returning with an answer to his proposal, so it was a shock to see his old pairing partner standing there, grinning at him.

"Riki!" Guy took three long strides across the room and pulled Riki into his arms. "You're okay, right?"

Riki remained stiff in Guy's arms. Guy? Guy was here? What else was gonna be thrown at him? Part of him wanted to return the embrace out of habit, but a spark of fear resonated through him because of all that Guy was responsible for in the past. His heart could reason away Guy's behaviour, but his mind, and that which was in charge of his survival instinct, did not want to be anywhere near him.

"Wh...what are you doing here?"

Guy pulled back to look at him. “We came to rescue you of course!” He glanced around the magnificent room. “Wow, this place is amazing. Do you know they have natural fruit here? It’s true, it actually grows on the trees! Real trees!”

Guy’s ridiculous exuberance in the face of Riki’s considerable emotional turmoil was enough to stir Riki’s anger and he shoved away.

“Have you lost your mind?” he snarled, furious. “Fruit? Trees? Do you even have a clue what’s going on here?”

“Yeah, of course!” Guy’s expression changed from wonder to concern. “They kidnapped you and we came to get you back!”

Riki’s hands curled into fists and he stepped back as Guy stepped toward him again. “Don’t! Don’t touch me!” Was this another attempt to get him away from Iason? It hurt. It hurt so much that he could no longer trust Guy, or trust his own judgement with him.

“Riki, come on man...I...”

“Who’s we?”

“Huh?”

“You said we came to rescue, twice. Who’s we?”

Guy glanced around to make sure they were truly alone. “Me and Shiao.”

“Who the fuck is Shiao?”

“Shiao’s my fr...” Guy paused, surprised that he was unwilling to admit to friendship with an Elite, especially after all he had done to show Riki that they couldn’t be trusted. “The Onyx I work with. I told you about him in my letter.”

“What letter?”

Guy's expression darkened. "He didn't give it to you?" He glared at the prone Elite on the bed.

Riki rubbed at his temples, he was getting a headache and didn't even have the emotional strength to stay angry. Iason was unconscious and if he had any hope of getting Iason safely back to on Amoï, he might have to become a permanent prisoner here. He was on this strange world with strange people who claimed to be his family, which he was trying to come to terms with, he still had no idea if Carrie was alive or dead, or even *what* Carrie was.

Now, Guy had shown up and he couldn't be sure if his old friend was here stalking him, in cahoots with the Royal family or was actually telling the truth.

"Mother Fucker, I knew he wouldn't. What a bastard!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Guy, but it doesn't matter..."

"It does matter! I wrote to you, trying to explain why I did what I did, trying to apologize. Look, I know you can never forgive me..."

Riki thought about Kirie, the boy he had refused to forgive, the boy he had turned over to Katze to save himself and Guy and now the young mongrel was a pet with a doll's mind. He did forgive Guy, truly he did, but he was wary of telling him so. Guy would take it as accepting what he had done and inspire him to do something even more stupid.

Guy stabbed a finger towards Iason. "That fucker almost killed me, would have if Shiao hadn't shown up..."

Riki sighed. "You haven't exactly given him a reason to like you, Guy."

"I don't give two rat-fuck shits if he likes me or hates me, but he took the letter. I thought that meant he would give it to you."

Riki wasn't pleased that Iason had kept the letter from him, but nor was he all that surprised and seeing as how being near Guy made him feel, he

wasn't even sure he would want to read some damn letter from his old friend. "Look, this...Shiao, if he is an Onyx, that's an Elite too, right? Where is he? Isn't he unconscious too?"

Guy blinked. "No, well, I don't think so." He again glanced at Iason. "Oh, you mean the Deep Sleep? No, it doesn't happen to him so..." He was startled when Riki grabbed him by the shirtfront.

"What do you know about it? What's happening to Iason? How can I wake him up? What do I have to do?"

***He will need something to focus on, something to hang on to.***

"I...nothing! I just know it doesn't affect Shiao! And...and if they aren't near Jupiter when it happens then they...might not wake up."

"W...what?" Panic stabbed through Riki's dark, flashing eyes. "What do you mean he won't wake up?"

Guilt permeated through Guy but he pushed it away. This was his chance to save Riki to finally get him away from Mink. He caught Riki by the shoulders. "Look, maybe it's better this way. You can be free, Riki. We can both be free and even live here, if you want. I mean, hell you're a fucking Prince! That's gotta be so much better than a mongrel or a pet..."

Riki shoved him away. "It's not that easy! Tell me what to do Guy! I need Iason to wake up!"

"Why? Do you like him fucking you that much?"

"You know nothing!" Riki screamed and stormed to the tall glass doors that led to the balcony, they too were sealed. He grabbed at the panic rising in his chest. "You don't know a fucking thing."

Guy swallowed hard, did Riki still believe he was in love with Mink? He felt the anger and betrayal burn through him, and tried to push it back. He had told Shiao that he had just wanted Riki to be happy, and that was true. It

didn't have to be with him, but why did it have to be with a Blondie? Shit. His feelings hadn't really changed at all, had they?

He supposed asking for forgiveness was pretty lame, especially when he really didn't deserve it. He had told himself that he would accept Riki being with Iason, if it meant they could be friends again, but seeing Riki again, seeing how he protected his stupid master was killing him.

He noticed that Riki had placed his hands against the door and seemed to be gasping for air. "Riki?" he moved forward. "Are you ok..."

He was suddenly shoved aside by a tall guard, who had silently entered the room. The guard stood between them with his weapon ready and denying him access. "What the fuck? Move asshole!"

The guard simply stared at him and remained where he was. "Maku, have you been injured?"

"W...what?" Riki managed, winced and rubbed his chest. What was this? It felt like he'd been shot with a stunner rifle, or something, and he was having trouble catching his breath. "My...chest...hurts."

"Take deep breaths, Maku," the guard offered kindly, but remained protective of his Prince. "It is merely anxiety. Try to calm your breathing."

Riki would have done anything to rid himself of such intense and frightening pain and so tried to do as the guard suggested.

"Riki, you okay man?" Guy again tried to move past the guard, failed. "Riki, tell this guy to get lost."

"They don't...listen to me," Riki muttered, even as his breathing did slowly become easier. It was working. "You think this place is so... great..." Deep breath, in and out. "But you don't get it. We're both... prisoners here. You coming here, that was really...really stupid."

"I told you why I'm here," Guy stated. "Do you really think I wouldn't come? You're my best friend, Riki!"

Of all people that Riki expected to come to their rescue, Guy had not even entered his mind. The fact that it was Guy and this other Elite, whoever the hell that was, worried him more. Was this Elite sent by Jupiter to protect Iason, or was he a rogue android sent to kill them both? Why was Guy even *with* an Elite, since he hated them so much? Were Guy and this Onyx the only ones that knew he and Iason had been captured? Was anyone else even looking for them? He couldn't depend on Guy because he had been betrayed by Guy's foolishness too often. So, where did that leave them exactly? Would it be up to him to get Iason and Carrie back home?

He slowly shook his head and turned, leaned his back against the doors. He would kill to go outside on the balcony, to get some air, the way he would if he were home, but this room, no matter how beautiful and spacious, was just another prison.

His chest still burned, but he could breathe and therefore would deal with the rest. "Convenient."

"What?"

"You're here, Guy, just like you were there at Orphe's. Just like when you took me to Dana Bhan. You're always here. Why?"

Guy's expression flashed in pain. "Riki. Come on. I know I screwed up in the past, but I love you, man. I was just trying to help, to make things better for you."

"I don't believe you!" Riki screamed and tears of anger and frustration sparkled in his eyes at the startling truth. "I can't believe you! You've made it impossible for me to trust you anymore. Every time something bad happens, you're there, just like you're here now. How the hell can I trust you when you're telling me to just let Iason die?"

"I... didn't mean...I would never hurt you...."

"All you *do* is hurt me, Guy! You cut my fucking dick off! Didn't you think that would hurt? You're constantly making me choose between you and

Iason. Every single time you hurt me! When. Are. You gonna stop hurting me?”

“I am! I did! I really did come here to rescue you. Look, I know you don’t believe me, and I do get that. I know I have to earn your trust again and I am willing to do whatever...” He glared at the guard who was still between them and curled his hands into fists. “Seriously, will you fucking move, before I flatten your face for you!”

Instead of waiting for the guard to obey, Riki simply stepped around him so he was facing Guy directly. “Why? Why does he have to move? What more could we possibly have to say to each other, Guy? What?”

Guy flushed in both anger and shame. “I just...thought you would want to be free! Don’t you?”

“Yes! Do you think I like being treated like a pet?”

“Then why stay?” Guy caught Riki’s hand. “Why not take this chance and...”

“It’s complicated.”

“How can it be...” Guy paused when his fingers brushed against something smooth and cool, and he glanced down at the ring on Riki’s third finger. “What?” In disbelief, his gaze flickered to the sleeping Blondie and the matching ring on Iason’s hand. Rage, sorrow and betrayal filled him and he released Riki as if scalded. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Riki snorted, not from humor but because the entire scenario was beyond bizarre and he simply didn’t have the strength to explain yet another of his decisions to Guy. Guy would never understand what he and Iason had. He turned away and moved to the bed to link his hand with Iason’s.

“You fucking paired with him?” Guy yelled. “Fucking bonded in ceremony?”



“Not in ceremony, no.” He was still a pet and so couldn’t officially bond with Iason. “Just between us.”

“Why? Why in the name of Jupiter would you do that?” Guy’s real outrage came from the fact that while Riki and he had been pairing partners for years, the dark haired mongrel had always brushed away the idea of a bonding ceremony. Yet he would do one with Mink, with a fucking Blondie? “What the fuck happened to you?”

Riki turned to Guy, his eyes as cold and dark as a bottomless pit. “I died.”

Guy’s fury cooled somewhat and he stared at Riki confused. “Huh?”

“You survived, but me and Iason, we actually died at Dana Bahn. You don’t understand it because you’ve never had that happen.”

“That makes no sense! You’re standing here in front of me!”

“Because Jupiter brought us back!” Riki snapped, angrily. “She cares about Iason, in her own way and she brought me back because she understood what Iason feels for me.” Well, perhaps understood was too strong a word, he really didn’t know if Jupiter understood anything about their relationship, but the point was she had approved of it, in her own weird way. “Look, the point is, she gave me back my life...”

“She wouldn’t have had to if you’d stayed away from that fucking guy!” Guy reminded harshly as he stabbed a finger towards the sleeping android.

“She wouldn’t have had to if you hadn’t kidnapped me, cut of my dick, and tried to blow us the fuck up!”

Guy blanched as the accusation hit him full in the face, and with it the cold hard truth that he had been denying. Had what he had done, all he had done, only pushed Riki closer to Mink? Oh God, how could...why...It wasn’t like that! He had never meant to do any of that!

Riki noticed that the guard was still standing there, watching them. “Weren’t you told to wait outside?” he reminded, coldly.

“I cannot allow any harm to come to you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not about to let that happen either, so fuck off.”

The guard nodded. “I shall do as you request, Maku, however I shall return if I hear raised voices again.”

“Whatever.” Riki watched the guard leave

“I...I wanted you back,” Guy admitted brokenly as a tear slipped out of his left eye. “I...I just wanted you back. I wanted you to be my Riki and my brother and my friend and...and no....no one else’s.”

Seeing the larger man actually cry pulled at Riki’s heart, and he was moved despite himself. All of the anger and rage flowed out of him and he slumped down on the bed. Fuck. He was getting sentimental in his old age.

“I know,” he said and ran a hand through his hair.

He had clearly understood Guy’s motives, hell if he had been in Guy’s place he might have acted the same way, but the problem was that his friend was not learning from his past mistakes. Guy had gone too far, on more than one occasion, and Riki could not forgive him for that.

He thought about how he would feel if Iason had made good on his initial threat, when he had come to Ceres to take him back to Tangura, and wondered if it had been Guy turned into a mindless sex doll, instead of Kirie,? Would his feelings change? Would he be able to forgive Iason, ever, if that had been done to Guy? He glanced down at the sleeping Blondie, and in an unusual display of affection stroked Iason’s pale cheek. Hadn’t he already forgiven Iason for much worse?

“Riki.” Guy slid down to his knees in front of the dark skinned man, humbling himself in a way that no Mongrel ever would, or should. “What...what can I do? I hate that this is between us. I know I caused it, I get that, but are you gonna stay mad at me forever?”

“Are you gonna hate Iason forever?” Riki countered, quietly, keeping his gaze on Iason rather than look at Guy and risk his resolve weakening further. “Are you gonna keep trying to tear us apart?”

Guy chewed on his lower lip, wiped his nose and sniffed. “I...I just don’t see...”

“Look at me.” Riki caught Guy’s tearful face between his hands. “There is only one thing for you to see and that’s the me I am now. I’m not happy, but I’m not miserable either.” Riki closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Guy’s in a familiar tradition they once had. “I need him, Guy. I don’t why, I keep asking myself why, but it doesn’t matter anymore. Maybe it’s physical, maybe it’s chemical...” Maybe it’s love, he finished silently, but knew such words would only exacerbate the situation. He started to pull back. “I don’t know what it is, so I can’t expect you to either.”

Riki,” Guy murmured as his larger hands slid over Riki’s, holding the smaller mongrel’s palms to his face, without trapping them. “It’s not right. It’s not right what he did to you.”

You have no idea what he did to me, Riki thought, and he prayed that Guy never would. “No, it’s not, but it’s done and these feelings...whatever they are, why ever they’re here, they’re real. I have to accept them, and maybe you’ll probably never understand it, but if you can accept it maybe...”

“Maybe...what?” Guy asked with the barest trace of hope in his voice.

“Maybe...one day... I can learn to trust you again.”

The urge to move slightly forward and touch his lips to Riki’s was incredibly strong, but Guy knew that would only make matters worse. He did want Riki’s trust, it had taken him years to earn it before, and he had just been a kid then. Surely, he could put just as much effort into regaining Riki’s trust as he had the first time?

“I...I want that. I really do.”

Riki pulled his hands away and stood up from the bed, needing to put some distance between them. He still had a strong attraction to Guy, but he knew much of that attraction came from the memories of their past together and not from anything physical. He couldn't feel anything sexual for anyone other than Iason now.

Guy rose slowly, stared at the Blondie laying so helplessly on the bed and flicked away the thought of decapitating the damn android in his sleep. "Mink hates me."

"You've given him cause to," Riki stated and returned to the balcony doors to stare out. "But...he's changing. He isn't the guy he was."

"Because he loves you?"

Riki shrugged, embarrassed. "I...I don't know. Maybe." He sighed and looked back at Iason, still sleeping. What the hell was he supposed to do? What options did he have? His worry and stress suddenly had him confessing to the man that had once been his friend. "I made a deal with them."

"Who?"

"Them, the people who brought me here, the King and Queen or whatever."

"What was the deal?"

"I told them I'd stay here if they let me send Iason back to Amoï."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"He needs to link with Jupiter...."

"So you'd just watch them take him off planet while you stay behind?"

"You were just telling me how amazing this place is..."

"That's different! Choosing to stay because you want to be here and selling your freedom to someone else just for a Blondie is different. You're just

exchanging one jail for another!”

Riki nodded. “Yeah.”

Really? Riki was willing to go that far to save his stupid Master? What had become of his friend, the mongrel rebel? What had become Riki the Dark?

Riki watched Guy’s expressions and sighed. “I’m the same, Guy, I haven’t change that much.” But he had, he’s accepted his role as a pet, allowed himself to be humiliated regularly. Had given up his rebellious nature to stay with a man he believed he could love. “I’m just making different choices.”

“I don’t believe you. Mink changed you, destroyed the person you are...”

“No, he...he just taught me how to adapt.”

Riki didn’t want to think about how he had changed, because in the end, he had made that choice consciously. Iason had left him no other option but to accept or lose what was left of his gang and himself, and somewhere between fighting and acceptance, his feelings for Iason became clearer, at least the part he understood of needing to stay with Iason. The rest he was still working out.

He turned back to Guy and lowered his voice significantly. “Look, this other Elite, can he get us out of here?”

“He’s working on it.”

“When? In the next twenty four hours?”

***If Jupiter is not there, the darkness, the isolation and emptiness can drive an android mad.***

“I...I don’t know,” Guy admitted as he tried to ignore Shiao’s words in his head.

“Then I’ll do whatever I have to, to get him home.”

“Riki!” Guy began then stopped in frustration. “We... You don’t even know these people. What if they want to do something bad to you?”

“What other choice to I have?” Riki demanded angrily, then took a deep breath to reign in his temper. He sat on the bed and picked up Iason’s hand. “I have no choice. He has to wake up. He *has* to.”

***I need to trust you. Please do not allow Iason to die.***

Fuck! Riki was serious. Losing Mink would probably devastate his friend, and...and it would probably upset Shiao too. He hated Iason Mink, but he loved Riki and didn’t want him hurt. He also wanted Shiao to know he could trust him, he owed Shiao so much already.

“Shit.” Guy curled his arms around himself as if trying to defend against the decision he was about to make. “Talk to him.”

“Huh?”

“Shiao....Shiao mentioned that maybe if you talk to Mink while he’s under, give him something to focus on he might be able to...to hang on until the sleep thing is over.”

Hope flared in Riki’s eyes and Guy hated him for it.

“Just talk to him?”

“Yeah, I guess. Something about filling the emptiness.”

Riki turned back to Iason, but another concern filled him. What the hell was he supposed to talk to Iason about for so long? It wasn’t as if they’d ever had any real in depth conversations. “What...what should I say?”

Guy snorted and dropped down into one of the chairs. “Why not tell him what a bastard he is for not giving you my letter?”

Riki smirked. “Will this really work, just talking to him?”

“How the fuck should I know? That’s what Shiao said, okay?”

“Why are you saying this now?” Riki asked, hating the fact that he still doubted his old friend’s motives. “Why didn’t you mention it before?”

“Why should I help him?” Guy retaliated, belligerently, and felt more the fool when Riki’s face darkened with disappointment. “Mink’s not exactly my favorite person, you know.” He balanced one ankle across his knee. “But then you had to get all pathetic looking and shit so...” Snapping his mouth closed, he shrugged.

“Guy...” Was it true? Could Guy really be trying to help and would just talking to Iason make a difference? He glanced at the unconscious Blondie. Did it matter? He was out of options, wasn’t he? If they did not allow Iason to go back to Amoï, this was really the only other course of action. “Thanks.”

Guy flushed with pleasure, which eased some of the anger and frustration that was building inside of him.

“Iason?” Riki began. “Um...can you hear me?”

“He can’t answer you, idiot.”

Riki glanced at Guy again. “Fuck off.” He turned his attention back to Iason. “Um...I’m sorry I got you into this, especially since it’s put you in this position away from Jupiter, but don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself, and I’ll take care of you too.” He paused trying to think of what else to say. He wasn’t the mushy sort, and he didn’t want to get too personal, especially with Guy sitting there behind him. “I’m still pissed at you, but... well, we’ll talk about that when you wake up and...”

The door opened again and this time it was Celestia.

“Hello, Riki.”

He glanced at Iason once more, before releasing the Blondie’s hand and rising from the bed. “Did he agree to it?”

“The King is considering your request.”

“Considering? We don’t have time to cons...”

“We do have time, my dear. We can have your Blue Eyes back on your planet in a few hours, however we both need certain assurances that you will not try to run away once he is gone.”

Riki wouldn’t make that promise, because he would run. He would try anything to escape.

She watched his expression, noted his silence. “As he suspected. So, you will fight against staying, even if we agree to help you?”

“Look, it’s your fault that he’s in this state. He needs to go back to Amoï or he’ll die! Do you want that on your hands?”

“Personally, no, but only because I understand it will bring you sorrow. Your father...”

“He *isn’t* my father.”

“The King believes you will get over the loss, in time, and that it would be better for you if Iason did expire.”

“If he dies, so will you,” Riki vowed. “I will kill all of you. I swear I will!”

The guards standing behind the Queen immediately advanced and Guy rose to stand behind Riki, ready to fight, just as they had in the old days. Riki was grateful for the gesture, more than Guy might realize.

The Queen held up her hand and the guards instantly lowered their weapons again. “I know you do not mean that.”

“I do!”

“No, that is your fear talking. My son is not a killer.”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know a fucking thing about me!”

“Exactly, and this brings me to our counter proposal.”



Riki crossed his arms over his chest, suspiciously. “Counter proposal?”

“Yes. You wish for us to bring your Iason back to Amoï so he can be repaired, correct?”

“Yes!”

“Then we require an act of good faith on your part, as well.”

“Like what?”

She held out her hand to him, smiled. “A walk.”

“Huh?” Both Riki and Guy said, simultaneously confused.

“I would like you to join me for a walk. It should not take long and I would like to show you some of the world you come from.”

“Why?” What was the point since he wasn’t going to be staying here? “So you have real fruit on real trees...bit fucking deal.”

The Queen’s expression flickered for a moment, her eyes hardened, but her smile remained. “I truly do not care for that particular word. I understand that you were raised in barbaric circumstances, so I have attempted to forgive such behaviour, but you are not on Amoï now and I would ask that you refrain from using such vulgarity around myself, or your...The King.”

Riki sneered at her. “Do I look like I fucking give two great fucks what you fucking...”

His head reared back from the force of her slap and he was appalled when tears sprung to his eyes. He’d been hit plenty of times, had felt far worse pain then being bitch slapped, so why did the sting of her palm against his skin seem to burn into him? Why did he feel like he had been stabbed through the ribs and gouged in the stomach at the same time?

Stumbling back, he held his cheek and slumped onto the bed, stunned by the shame that suddenly crawled through him.

“Hey!” Guy snapped angrily at the Queen, surprised at Riki’s unusual reaction. “Who do you think you are? You can’t do that!”

“Be quiet!” Celestia warned in a tone that brokered no argument and Guy was shocked when the rest of his protests died in his throat. She stepped towards Riki, reached for him and watched him flinch away from her. “I apologize,” she offered gently. “I did not mean to do that, but you must understand that your behavior is unacceptable. I am your mother, and a Queen, you cannot speak to me in such a way and not expect there to be repercussions.”

He stared up at her mutinously.

“Here,” she reached for him again and he shoved her hand away. “Let me do this. Please?”

Riki didn’t know why he listened, why he gave in, but he lowered his hand and let her touch his cheek. An instant later, the sting from her slap was gone, and he stared at her, bewildered. He waited until she stepped back and gathered his courage again.

“I’m a slum mongrel from Ceres,” he stated. “I’ll say what I want to who I want and if you’re expecting any better then maybe you should take us back and go find some other guy to be your precious Maku.”

“You are a slum mongrel, yes, but that is not all you are.”

“No, I’m also a pet, so you see, I’m really not Prince material.”

“Come, walk with me. Give me one hour of your time and then I will speak to the King again and we will make a decision about your request.”

Riki knew that he’d have to go along with it, because he did need to get Iason back home, but he wouldn’t go easily. His pride was barely hanging on by a thread, but by the Gods he’d tighten that thread until it fully snapped.

He glanced at Iason, and felt a small flicker of stunned disappointment that the Blondie had not reared up and attacked the Queen. Did that mean he really was unreachable in this state? Had he already lost Iason to the darkness and silence?

“I can’t leave him alone. I have to keep talking to him.”

“Your friend will do that for you, I am sure,” Celestia glanced at Guy. “Will you not?”

Really? Guy thought. Telling Riki how Iason might be saved and actually taking part in that salvage was two very different things for Guy. He still hated Iason, would still prefer the Blondie never wake up and Riki could be free.

“He won’t,” Riki muttered immediately.

“I will,” Guy found himself saying, not because he wanted to help Iason, but because it hurt that Riki had so quickly refuted the Queen’s suggestion. How very fall he had fallen. If he had any hope of regaining Riki’s trust, he would have to do this. “I’ll talk to him until you get back, Riki.”

“Will you really?” Riki asked, but the real question was in his eyes. *Can I really trust you to do this for me?*

Guy nodded emphatically. “You can. I promise...Although, I’m not too sure what I can find to talk to him about either.”

Riki held Guy’s gaze for a long, hard moment, then reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his novel. “Then read to him.”

Guy accepted the book. “Aww, man, you know I suck at reading out loud. I’m not good at the big words like you are.”

“It won’t make a difference, just do the best you can.” He rose clapped his hand on Guy’s shoulder. “It’s only for an hour. Do this for me.” *Don’t disappoint me again.*

Guy nodded. "I will. I'll read to him until you get back, I'll even do voices."

Riki's lips twitched in what might have been a grin, but it just ended up a sad, lopsided smirk. "Okay." He turned to Celestia. "One hour, and I'm not promising to behave any better than I have been."

The Queen actually threw back her head and laughed, startling everyone in the room and making Riki flush. "Agreed." She extended her hand to him again.

"Not holding hands either." He shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and stormed towards the doors, before glancing back at her. "Are you coming? Let's get this over with."

Celestia nodded serenely and followed. One of the guards remained inside by the door, the other went out with the Queen and Riki.

Guy looked at Iason, considered how simple it would be to grab a chair and smash it into the android's face until not even the brain matter remained, then he looked down at the book in his hands. "Fuck."

He pulled one of the chairs closer to the bed, dropped down into it and crossed his long legs. He hoped Shiao would make an appearance soon, because he did not know how much more of this he could take. Opening the book, he began with the first paragraph.

"The road was empty and dark, boarded by trees that held no birdsong." He glanced at the cover again. What was this shit? He shook his head and continued. "A heavy mist had started to per...perm...permeate the air, curling out from the trees to the sides of the road, but never across it."

## Chapter 24

### Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul wakes up, Guy makes a decision and Riki gets to know his mother. Please Review.

Raoul's eyes shot open and he stared, confused and unfocused through the clear chamber that surrounded him, No! No, why was he awake? He had been fully immersed in the essence of Jupiter, warm, content and joyous, and suddenly he was ripped from that serenity.

When he pressed his hand to the glass, the chamber hissed open to release in an invisible sealant. Why was this happening? What had he done to deserve such punishment? He wanted to go back, back into the Joining. Had he the ability, he might have wept, as a thundering of emotions pummelled him, causing him to take a step forward and instantly dropped him to his knees.

What was this? What was wrong? He managed to glance around and saw that all of the other Elites were still safely encased in their transmersian chambers, and a severe jealousy tore through him. *They* were still with Jupiter. They were receiving the joy and satisfaction and...

“Master Raoul!”

He turned his aching head slowly, spotted a tall blond furniture rushing towards him and his eyes flashed red. Someone would pay. Someone would pay for awakening him too soon!

A long cloak was suddenly draped over him to cover his nakedness and the gentleness of the gesture somewhat soothed his rage, so that instead of reaching up and breaking the boy's neck, he caught hold of a solid shoulder instead and allowed himself to be assisted to his feet.

“C...Cal?” he managed, his voice didn't sound right and it was difficult to talk. He looked around at the rows and rows of Elites, from floor to ceiling,

all still asleep, all still joined with Jupiter. Why had he been awakened? Why had he been released and left alone?

Cal caught Raoul as the Elite started to fall forward again. "Lean on me, Sir."

He looked at the boy, confused. "I feel terrible."

"It is because the sedation process is incomplete."

"Oh?" Raoul allowed Cal to help across the platform. "Why?" Why had he been released too soon? What did this mean? Was Jupiter abandoning him? Was he to be terminated? Was this because of his experiments or because he had sided with Iason too often? What was....

*Be at ease, my son.*

*Jupiter! What have I done? How can I repent?*

*Hush now. Your emotions must settle. They have become overactive due to the unexpected cessation of the link.*

"Why do this to me?" Raoul asked aloud as he was finding it difficult to concentrate and continue telepathically. He and Cal stepped out of the lift and into the dressing area and Cal settled him on a bench then hurried to gather the Elite's clothing. Why was Iason's Furniture here and not his own? Why were his thoughts so...scattered?

*Your early awakening need be known only to a select few. Go with the Furniture, let your mind rest and catch up. Once you are at your destination, and have recovered, I will advise.*

"Wait!" He felt cold and alone again. He was unaccustomed to such sensations, had never experienced them before and he did not care for it at all. "Jupiter?"

"Master Raoul?" Cal stood before him holding out a tunic. "We have to hurry."

“Hmmm?” Raoul stared at Cal, and for some reason, another face started to superimpose itself over the boy’s. “Where’s Katze?”

“He has reached Avalon,” Cal advised as he helped Raoul to dress. “He said he will contact us when he has found Master Iason and Riki.”

“Is...is that why I am awake?” Raoul rose, tried to walk on his own, but found he wasn’t quite steady and had to lean on Cal again; the boy was taller than the average Furniture now, and was apparently stronger than he looked as well. “Cal...Why am I?”

“I apologize for having no answers, Sir. I was told to come and retrieve you, that is all that I know. I am sorry.”

“Who told you?”

Cal flushed. “M...My Lady Jupiter, Sir.”

“She spoke with you?” With a Furniture? Was that even possible?”

“Yes Sir. Please forgive my impudence. I will bring a wand if you desire to prepare my punishment, but first we must get you home and settled.”

Raoul paused to look down at the boy, as they reached a portal exit. “No wonder Iason likes you.” He watched the youth’s face turn crimson, then they stepped through the swirling blue mist.

He was not surprised to find himself in his lab, nor was he surprised that Jupiter had surpassed all his security codes to allow a regular portal to transport them there.

Raoul found himself reluctant to move away from Cal, the warmth and comfort the boy offered was assisting him in keeping his emotions together. Cal helped him over to the chair at the desk and started to pull away, but Raoul found himself catching the boy’s wrist.

“Wait,” he murmured as he pulled Cal forward and wrapped his arms around the youth. “I need a moment, just as this.”

Any other Furniture might have been horribly uncomfortable at being held by an Elite, after all, Furniture served an entirely different purpose than pets, but Cal was professional to the core and neither tensed nor stammered; he simply placed his hands on Raoul's shoulder's and waited.

"Does Iason do this with you?" Raoul asked as he inhaled the light scent of the boy's soap.

"He does not."

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" Why was he even asking? Had he been himself he would not care for the comfort of another, especially a Furniture. His thought process was so scattered, so insane...so, Human at this moment.

"I am here to serve you in whatever capacity you require, Sir."

Raoul lifted his head and met Cal's gaze. There was no shame or uncertainty, just patience in the boy's expression. Iason was right, this boy had more depth than the average Furniture, just as Katze had. He wondered what Iason would do with Cal, now that he was nearly grown, and then considered asking his friend if he might give Cal to him. He would make an excellent lab assistant.

Raoul slowly pulled back and straightened. "Pour me a drink, would you?"

"Certainly, Sir." Cal glanced around and Raoul pointed to the far wall and the panel beside it. Cal pressed his palm to the section and a small mini bar opened. He poured a generous helping from one of the blue bottles into a crystal glass and returned to hand it to Raoul.

While an Elite could not get drunk, Raoul still found the taste of alcohol soothing when he was upset. "Jupiter told you nothing else?" he demanded after he had swallowed down the drink and quickly handed it back to Cal for a refill.

His glanced at his hand, which shook slightly and he willed it still. An unquenchable ache crawled through him and he tried to push it back. He



told himself it was because the joining process had been incomplete, as Jupiter had said, but it was having a strange effect on his systems.

If Iason had gone into the Deep Sleep, it was unimaginable what his friend might be going through, and it took all of his willpower not to get on the first ship to this damned Avalon and destroy the lot of them. “What do we know?”

Cal returned with a second drink and quickly provided what information he had been given from Katze.

“Did you find the person Katze spoke of?”

“Oh yes, and I have already arranged for an exchange. Both parties are willing. I was just waiting for Katze to confirm.”

Raoul lifted an eyebrow. Not bad for a Furniture. Maybe there was something to Iason’s belief of utilizing other skills in the Humans. “Good.” He was tired suddenly, and he never felt tired. Was this what Jupiter had meant about him needing to settle? “I need to shut down for a few minutes.” He started to close his eyes then opened them again. “Where is the other one?”

“Sir?”

“The pet. There was a pet with you when I left for the Joining, was there not?”

“Yes, Anjell. He is sleeping, Sir.”

“Ah.” Raoul checked his internal chronometer and realized it was still a two hours before dawn. “Good. Have you?”

“Have I what, Sir?”

“Slept?”

“No, Sir. I have been busy.”

“It seems you have. What of Iason’s other Furniture?”

“I have been unable to locate, Bean, Sir.”

“You didn’t return to Iason’s did you? We told you to keep a low profile while we were away.”

“Yes, Sir, and I have, however all Furniture can be accounted for on the system due to the microchip receive upon becoming Furniture.”

“Yet you cannot find him?”

“No, and it is a cause for concern.”

Raoul’s gaze narrowed. “What is your concern?”

“As a fellow Furniture, I would not wish him to be harmed, Sir. However...” Cal paused.

“Continue.”

“I have no proof for my second concern, Sir.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I have suspicion that Cal may have been involved in my confinement, as well as the abduction of Master Riki and Master Iason.”

“That is a serious charge.”

“Yes, and that is why I wished to find more proof before making such a charge.”

Raoul nodded. “Yes, well, it seems that even my own brethren are not to be trusted at this point. There is definitely a conspiracy, and I believe we have only hit the very edge of it. Jupiter also wished for my awakening to be confidential, so perhaps she suspects the same.”

“Did she say anything else about why you were awakened, Sir?”

“No, not yet. Perhaps after I settle.” He closed his eyes again and waved his hand. “Go wait for Katze’s call. Return to me when you have heard from him.”

“Yes sir.”

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Iason’s temperature was not regulating, how was that possible? Was this what it meant to feel cold? Why was it so quiet? Why was it so dark? Even the hallway of memories had disappeared. Was this death? He had faced death before, and it did not feel this desolated, or this frightening. Was he frightened? Fear was something he had experienced before, but it was usually attributed to losing Riki.

Had he lost Riki? Was that why he could not find his a way out of the darkness? Was it such loss that created this cold, hollow sense inside of him? Jupiter? Jupiter! You promised I could keep him. You promised!

Riki! How could he have lost Riki? There was no point any to anything if he could not have Riki. He could not go back to the life he had before, to the surface respect of his brothers, to the unchecked fear of his subordinates and barely veiled disgust of the humans. To shut down his emotions again, to force himself to feel nothing, so that only distain and cruelty survived. He was more than that now, Riki had made him more, Riki had brought him back from the brink of tedious isolation and offered him beauty and wonder and depth of feeling unlike any he had ever known.

He tried to comfort himself by remembering his times with Riki, but when he did that, the memories became skewed and incomprehensible, causing him to cry out in despair and rage. Jupiter...Mother! Help me! I need Riki, please!

A sob tore from him as pain laced through his skull; his memories of Riki were slowly being stripped away from him, each pull, each reluctant tear shattered his senses and caused an incalculable number of synapsis to explode inside of his brain. He could not hold onto them. No! No, please! Do not take him! The memories were replaced with lesser thoughts. Visions

of the brutality he had caused because of the pain he had suffered from other's hatred. Thoughts of vengeance and disgust, and then, worst of all, thoughts of boredom, segregation and the most horrific of all things, the feeling of being nothing, feeling nothing, living as a cold, heartless machine again.

No! He was unique! He would make himself what he decided to be! More pain, more memories gone. The more he struggled against the vacuum that was sucking out his precious recollections the faster thousands of unknown emotions surged into him, to the point where he could not catch his breath, had he needed oxygen to breathe. Death. This was death, and so he would accept it. He would be with Riki in death, and they would share a kiss in the great nothingness that enfolded them. Yes, he was ready to die now, death was better than this raping of his mind, this endless torment and....

*'I've never seen that man before,' the woman said, but the Detective could see she was lying.*

*'You've never seen him before? Are you sure?'*

*'Yes, I'm sure.'*

What was this? Who was that talking? The voice sound familiar. Was it Riki? No, no it wasn't Riki, but it was someone he recognized. And who was the woman? What were they talking about?

*'Admit that you killed him. Admit that you were upset he spurned your advances and so you whacked him with an available weapon and then escaped when you realized the blow killed him.'*

*'I don't know what you're talking about! Why would I kill a complete stranger?'*

Someone was dead? Who was dead? Were they talking about him? Had he died by being hit with something? No, that wasn't possible. So who had this woman killed? Curious, Iason spotted the dimmest crease of light and reached towards it, and in doing so, some of his pain seemed to ease. He almost sighed in relief.

Guy glanced up at the breathy sound that released from Iason, kind of like a slow leak in a tire, and scowled. Was he waking up? Could the Blondie actually hear him? “Hey? You in there asshole?”

Silence.

“You better come back from...well, from wherever the hell you are, because if you die, Riki’s gonna blame me.”

Guy cleared his throat and continued reading, then glanced over at a sound by the window. A shadow of a face appeared and he felt his heart speed up, then he glanced at the guard who was by the door, who had also noticed the sound. He leaned forward over Iason.

“Hey! I think he’s waking up!”

The guard turned his attention back to the bed and moved forward. “Has it moved?”

“I saw his eyelids flicker.” Guy rose and stepped back. “You might wanna get something to tie him down, he will be pissed when he wakes up.”

The guard leaned over Iason and then found the floor rushing up to meet him as he immediately fell forward. Guy stared down at the unconscious man and flexed his mechanical hand, then rushed to the terrace windows, but he couldn’t open them.

Shiao waved Guy back from the other side and pulled a small pen like object from his pocket. A blue beam of light shot out from it as the Onyx ran the laser down the seam of the doors; a moment later they popped open.

“Shiao!” Guy had thrown his arms around the Onyx before he realized his own intention. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was such an ass before. I didn’t mean...”

Shiao patted Guy’s shoulder then stepped back, his gaze settled on Iason. “How is he?”

“Asleep. I...I’ve been reading to him, trying to give him something to focus on, like you said. The Queen took Riki for a walk, or some shit, but you said to keep talking to him, so...”

Shiao squeezed the mongrel’s shoulder. “Thank you, my friend.” He walked over to the bed, sat down and put his hand to Iason’s temple.

“What are you doing?” Guy asked and when Shiao didn’t answer him, he touched the Onyx’s arm. A spark of...something zapped him and he stepped back, holding his tingling hand.

It was still another minute or more before Shiao looked at him. “Apologies. I have created a semi- telepathic link between my consciousness and Iason’s, so that he will feel less isolated and...” He paused startled as a surge of rage flowed through him.

Guy stepped back again, as he watched the Elite’s eyes flash red. “S... Shiao?”

Shiao closed his eyes and when he opened them again, they were back to their usual jade green. “His emotions are...severe. Even more so than my own were when I was created.” He looked down at Iason’s prone form. “How is he able to contain them so well?”

“What are you talking about?” Guy asked, then glanced down at the unconscious guard. “Listen, what’s the plan?”

“The plan,” Shiao began as he rose and pulled Iason over his shoulder. “Is to get the hell out of here.”

“Great, good.” Guy moved with him towards the terrace than paused. “Wait, what about Riki?”

“We will come back for him.”

“What? No! No we can’t!” If Riki returned and found Iason gone Guy would never regain his trust again. “He’ll think I did this! He’ll hate me again.”

“Does he not already hate you?”

“That isn’t the point! Look, we can’t just take Iason away. Riki...” He paused as he realized how frightened and upset his friend would be. A hollow pit opened inside him, and then was slowly filled with an uneasy acceptance. It was true, Riki did love Iason, did need him and Guy was only hurting his friend by his interference. “We can’t do this to him.”

“Guy, we must get Iason away from here and back to Jupiter. Your friend is in no danger currently and...”

Guy caught Shiao’s hand. “That’s not it! Riki...” The truth sank in further as he struggled to make the Elite understand. “Think...Think about how I would feel if it were you. If I went off somewhere in a strange place far from home, with people I couldn’t trust and came back to find you gone.”

Shiao tilted his head. “How would you feel?”

Guy lifted his hand to touch the Onyx’s cheek. “Devastated.”

Shiao scowled down at Guy, trying to comprehend what the mongrel was trying to tell him, and as he did, another surge from his link with Iason sprang forward. His eyes flashed white and he suddenly grabbed Guy by the shirt and yanked the mongrel up on his toes to crush their mouths together.

Guy was too shocked at first to do anything but accept the kiss, while dangling on his toes, then he found himself getting aroused and started to kiss Shiao back. Their lips and tongues tangled in a desirable dance of lust that left Guy breathless within moments.

Almost as suddenly as he had been captured, the mongrel was swiftly released and found himself looking up at a stunned Onyx.

“I...I apologize. I do not know why....” He did know, Iason’s emotions were filtering into him. “I am so very sorry, Guy.”

“I’m not,” Guy returned boldly. “I’ve wanted you to do that for a while.”

“You...you have?”

“Yeah, but this isn’t the time for that kind of discussion. We can’t just take Iason away.”

“Guy....” Shiao struggled to regain his calm that the kiss with Guy had so efficiently shattered. “I understand your concern, but as long as Iason is here, they can use him to force your friend to do as they desire. It is logical to remove Iason from the equation and thus eliminate their negotiation tool.”

What Shiao said made sense, but Guy still couldn’t just leave and let Riki think this was some kind of plot again. “You take him then, do what you have to and I’ll stay here.”

“You cannot! They will blame you for his disappearance. They may try to harm you.”

“I have to stay and explain to Riki!”

“He may not believe you.”

“No, maybe not, but I have to try. He definitively won’t if I just leave without saying anything.”

Shiao continued to scowl. “This is not logical.”

“I’m a mongrel, what do you expect.”

Shiao considered for a moment then nodded. “Very well, I will have to trust that you understand your own actions. I will take Iason somewhere safe and will be back for you.” He reached out, paused, then continued and touched Guy’s cheek. “Wait for me and do not do anything foolish.”

“Who, me?” Guy grinned at the sardonic look that Shiao offered in return. “Go on. Oh, weren’t you gonna blow something up?”

“I have developed a better plan, but we will be headed home soon, I promise.”

Guy nodded. “Go, get out of here before they come back. No, wait!” He had an idea. “Hit me.”



“What? Why would I do that?”

“Trust me.” Guy juttled out his chin. “Come on, lay it on me. Make it hard enough to bruise.”

“Guy...”

“Do it!”

Shiao stuck him and Guy almost circled himself from the force before dropping to the terrace. He put his hand to his bleeding lip. “Fucking...ow.”

“I’m sorry!”

Guy grinned as he climbed to his feet. “No, it’s perfect. Now, go.”

“Yes.” Shiao moved to the terrace and tossed a leg over the rail, despite carrying Iason, his movements were as graceful and fluid as ever. Be careful, my friend.”

“You too.” On impulse, Guy leaned in and kissed the Onyx on the lips. “See ya.”

Shiao smiled, surprised then slid his second leg over and dropped from sight. Guy watched him hit the ground several stories below, still on his feet, and then the Onyx disappeared into the trees.

Guy returned to the room, started to close the terrace doors, then decided to leave them open. He glanced at the guard, and at the empty bed, then decided to lay on the floor and closed his eyes. He really hoped that Riki believed him.

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Riki had remained stubbornly silent as Celestia showed him the lush gardens, spectacular waterfalls and plentiful orchards that their world had to offer. He could admit, to himself, that this world was so close to his idea of paradise that it was frightening. However, if the King and Queen were

telling the truth, and he really was from here, maybe his visions of paradise were simply brought on by memories of his fast.

Their walk through the castle showed an assortment of artwork and antiques, some were beautiful and awe inspiring, some Riki did not completely understand. Two guards walked several paces behind them, and people, servants and probably some connected to Royalty all bowed respectfully as they passed. The Queen acknowledged most of them with a smile or a nod, and seemed unaffected by the attention, but to Riki it was the same a Cal walking him around the marketplace on a chain. He was still being put on display for the benefit of another.

The Queen continued to drone on about their history and ancestors, as she had about the different species of plants in the gardens, but Riki had stopped listening some time ago. All he could think about was if Guy was talking to Iason, and if Iason was responding. Had Iason woken up to Guy's voice and decided to murder his old pairing partner? Or had Guy just left Iason in the silence? Would Iason be dead when he returned?

"Your Majesties."

Riki focused his attention to a beautiful young woman who stepped up to them and only then realized that they were outside again, in some sort of columned courtyard.

"Hello Ruzanna," Celestia smiled and then turned to Riki. "This is your cousin, Ruzanna. You are of the same age."

The pretty girl smiled shyly at Riki and offered him a small courtesy. "It is very good to see you again, Ceil."

Riki's eyes narrowed. "My name's Riki."

"He speaks!" Celestia teased, for Riki had not said a word from the moment they had left his rooms. "I was starting to think you had swallowed your tongue."

The girl blinked, confused and glanced at the Queen.

“Riki is the name he was given while he was away, and he prefers to use it going forward, Ruzanna,” Celestia explained.

Ruzanna’s smile returned. “I rather like it, it is a bold name and one I would be happy to bear.”

“Happy to what?” Riki asked. “What does she mean?” he demanded.

Before the Queen could warn her to stay silent, Ruzanna’s words tumbled out, excitedly.

“I am your betrothed! You have grown into such a handsome man, Cei... um...Riki. I will be a proud wife to bear such striking children for you.”

Riki stumbled backwards as if she had slapped him. “What the fuck are you saying?”

Celestia waved her hand at the young woman, who flushed crimson as she realized the blunder she had made and hurried off.

The Queen turned to Riki, and lifted her hands peacefully. “Ruzanna was a touch over enthusiastic at your return and we have not explained the situation to her as yet.”

“Well you better explain it!” The idea of being bonded to a woman, of having children both excited and frightened Riki.

“It was an agreement made when you were both children, as her father is a good friend and a powerful ally to our people.”

This place was no different from Amoï- he was still being put up for sale! “Is that why you kidnapped me? To pair me to someone to gain something?”

“Of course not, and we do not expect you to honour the agreement, given the current circumstances.” She smiled at him. “When you are married it will be to someone you love...”

“I love Iason!”

“Someone human, Riki! Be reasonable!”

“Fuck reasonable! You say you want me to be happy, but you stole me away from my home...”

”*This* is your home.”

“You’re lying! All you do is fucking lie...” Riki’s face thrust sideways as Celestia slapped him, and just as quickly, hers went the opposite way as his palm connected to her cheek.

“How dare you!” she gasped, appalled, yet she waved the guards who had been following them back. “I am a Queen of Avalon! I do not lie and I have forbidden you to use that word in my presence.”

“Everybody lies! Everybody has an angle....”

No! You would not understand because of the dystopian society that you have been raised, a society of slavery and deception, but here on Avalon we believe in the goodness of others, the freedom of others. We have no need of lies when the truth is so much more powerful.” Her tone was different from before, regal, powerful, even as her chest heaved in anger. “And if you ever strike me again I’ll have you beheaded!”

“It’s not nice to threaten your only son.” Riki leaned in, toe to toe with her. “You keep your hands to yourself and I’ll do the same.” He watched her eyes flash in anger, and then her lips twitched in amusement.

“Fair enough,” she agreed.

Riki crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. He wouldn’t apologize, because she had started the altercation by hitting him to begin with. He had allowed it the first time, because he had been too shocked to do otherwise, but he couldn’t let it slide twice. He would not appear weak in front of these people, female or male.

She took a deep breath then moved to one of the benches along the pathway. She patted the space beside her and when Riki ignored the invitation, she sighed. “Sit down for Arthur’s sake. My feet are killing me from all that walking.”

Riki reluctantly sat next to her. “I need to get back to Iason.”

“You promised me an hour, I have fifteen minutes left.”

“I don’t care about that. I have to get home...”

“You are home, Riki.”

“No. I don’t belong here.”

“This is the one place you do belong.” She caught Riki’s hands with hers. “I know you are angry and frightened and disillusioned, but can you not allow me to show you the world you come from? Can we not just take this moment between us to...to know one another?”

The urge to agree was stronger than Riki expected, and because it was, he immediately sensed a trap. “Iason....”

“Will be fine. He is not going anywhere.”

“He needs to go back to Amoī. Send him back and I’ll...”

“You must give me this time, Riki, without reservation or bargaining.”

“Why?” he demanded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why do I have to give you anything?” He could see that he was testing even her impressive patience.

“I could resort to threats, as my husband does, and have your android disassembled and sold off for parts...”

“If you touch him...” Riki began, hotly and she raised a long, slender hand.

“I said I could, but I won’t,” she continued. “Can you not reward my benevolence with a little more of your time?”

Riki stared at her, confused. “Why? Why is it important to you?”

“I am your mother. Is that not reason enough?”

“No.”

She released frustrated laugh. “So hard headed, just like your father.”

Riki chose not to respond.

“Come, take advantage of our time together. You must have questions for me. Ask them and I will answer them honestly.”

“When can I leave?”

“Questions other than about leaving or your android.”

“That’s not being honest.”

“Riki, please.” She reached for his hands again but this time he pulled away. “Do you truly not remember your father or I at all? I sensed something from you earlier, some sort of recognition.”

Riki didn’t know if he should tell her the truth and see what more he could learn, or lie and keep his distance.

“You just demanded honesty from me, can you not do the same?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and slumped against the bench. “There was...something, I guess.”

“What was it? Tell me, please?”

He shrugged. The recognition of the King had been because of his flashbacks, but with the Queen...it had been her voice and her...”You smell.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You smell of something...familiar. I remember your smell.” He shifted uncomfortably as he realized how lame that sounded. “That’s all I got, okay?”

“My smell,” she repeated, curious, then suddenly rose. To the guards she said. “You are dismissed.”

They bowed and moved away as she turned to Riki. “I have an idea. Come with me.”

“I thought we were almost done?” he complained, but stood regardless.

“Almost.” She grabbed his hand firmly in his and started striding across the courtyard in such a rush that Riki almost had to run to keep up with her. They entered the castle again and then headed down a steep spiral set of stone steps.

The Queen pushed through a set of large wooden doors and the scent of braised meats, freshly washed vegetables and a selection of sweets assaulted them. The cooks and kitchen preparer’s immediately stopped what they were doing, turned and bowed slightly at the sight of the Queen.

“Your Majesty,” an old, plump woman with rich mahogany skin greeted, wiping her hands on an apron that barely wrapped around her wide girth. “What brings...” She paused as her dark, keen eyes settled on Riki, then sparked in moisture. Her gaze returned to the Queen. “Your Majesty...is... is he?”

“Adell,” Celestia smiled and nodded. “This is Riki, my son.”

“Oh!” The old woman cried and tears overflowed from her eyes as she dropped to her knees, as did everyone else around the kitchen. “Oh Blessed be. Blessed be, our young Maku is home at last!”

“S...stop it,” Riki stammered, uncomfortable with the display. What were they doing? Why would anyone bow to him? He was just a mongrel from Ceres. “Please, get up!” He dropped down beside the old woman and tried to lift her back to her feet, and was startled when a pair of meaty arms suddenly pulled him into an incredibly soft, cushioned embrace.

“I’ve prayed for this day. My little poppet is back home again. Oh, Maku, we have missed you.”

Poppet? What the hell was a poppet?

The old woman suddenly rose, pulling Riki with her, and wiped at her eyes with the same apron she had used to wipe her hands. “I know just what you need! A fresh batch was made just this morning.” Adelle hustled across the room, surprisingly swift for such a large woman, to one of the massive kitchen cupboards and reached inside to pull out a covered tray.

Riki stepped back, almost into the Queen as the cook shoved a plate of small brown squares at him. “I...what is it?” But the smell had already reached him and a wave of nostalgia almost overwhelmed him.

“We make them every day, the Queen and I. Have since the time you left us.”

Riki’s reached a trembling hand toward one the squares as nausea tightened his gut and a swirling began in his mind.

“They’re you’re favorite, just like the ones we always made for you.”

He lifted the brownie to his lips and took a small taste, just as the visions that was chasing him attacked and left him unconscious and weightless in the darkness.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry is such a short chapter, but now I am stuck. I have scenes written further down the story, but I am having trouble finding filler to go in



between. I have thoughts and ideas, but no real cohesion that will properly lead to the ending, which I really should get to as this story has gone on far longer than I had intended.

If anyone has any suggestions on what they would like to see happen in the next couple of chapters, please email me at [animefaemoon@gmail.com](mailto:animefaemoon@gmail.com). Maybe it will help spark some ideas.-

## Chapter 25

### Summary for the Chapter:

A little-off story smut for those of you who asked for it :-)- Raoul receives his directive from Jupiter-Katze meets a new Ali and Carrie discovers things are not all as they seem on Avalon

Raoul swept a glove hand over Katze's broad shoulders as he walked around the furniture, then allowed his hand to skirt down the Human's back and finally squeezed his perfectly rounded buttocks. Katze did not even flinch.

"Do you truly feel nothing?"

Katze lifted an eyebrow. "What is it you expect me to feel?"

"You don't feel any sort of arousal or stimulation?" Raoul demanded as he slid his arms around Katze and caressed the young man's chest through his thin tunic.

"No."

"How does it make you feel?"

"Irritated."

"Because I am touching you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Do you like being touched without permission?"

Raoul smiled, caught Katze's chin and tilted his face so that they were looking eye to eye. "I am a Blondie. I do not require permission to touch another." Katze stared at him silently and his smile grew wider. "All right

then, shall I ask permission?" He leaned in closer and breathed into Katze's ear. "May I touch you?"

"Are you really giving me a choice?"

Raoul chuckled. "No." His hand slipped around Katze's neck and swiftly captured the red-head's lips in a fierce, devouring kiss.

Katze's lips responded appropriately, but it was obviously just the training of a Furniture and held no real passion. After all, as a Furniture he had often been called upon to teach new pets how Iason preferred them to interact, kissing, touching and even fellatio had been par for the course.

"Are we done now?" Katze asked when Raoul finally released him.

"No, I believe further tests are required."

"Further..." Katze began and suddenly found himself lifted and slammed onto one of the lab tables. "What are.....Mmmfffhh!" His words were silenced as Raoul fused their lips together once more.

Raoul quickly removed Katze's clothing, despite the young man's protests, and climbed over him. "I wish to see what it is that Iason finds so stimulating with *his* pet."

"I'm not a pet!" Katze insisted and tried to push Raoul away.

"No, you are so much more."

"No! Penetration is forbidden!"

"What does it matter, since you feel nothing?"

Raoul pushed inside Katze with a single, powerful thrust and the cry the Human emitted enchanted him. So hot and tight! Was this why the pets became so excited and rutted together so furiously at times? This exquisite heat and pressure?

"R...Raoul!"

Raoul continued to thrust inside of Katze as the young man squirmed and gasped beneath him. “You do feel something,” he hissed as he continued the assault. “Tell me you feel something. Tell me you feel it for...”

Raoul’s eyes flew open just as a strange, pleasurable shock shivered through him. He blinked once, twice and quickly ascertained that he was still in his lab. “Cal?” he whispered, as if afraid the Furniture might actually answer him. Then he repeated the boy’s name, louder, but there was still no reply.

“What in the name of Jupiter...” he began as he slowly rose and tried to analyze what had just happened. Had that been a dream? He had never dreamed before, so why would he start now? And why Katze? Why dream of having sex with a Furniture, a Human?

Running a full diagnostic scan, he calculated that there were no issues and he was functioning within normal parameters. He walked over to the bar and poured himself another drink, disturbed to find that his hand was shaking again. His mind returned to the dream. It had felt so real! He would not deny that he was mildly curious about why Iason had chosen to break that boundary with his pet, but mostly he had been disgusted by it. In the dream, however, he felt something else. Stimulation, arousal, lust, all for Katze.

“Inconceivable.”

*‘I do not believe that word means what you think it means, my son.’*

*‘Jupiter! What have you done to me?’*

*‘You are in distress?’*

*‘I dreamed of a Furniture. Why would I do that?’*

*‘Has the Furniture been on your mind?’*

“No!” Raoul denied aloud, then considered. “Yes. I imagine he has been actually. Not only with what is happening with Iason, but he has lately

become more interesting to me.” He paused. “For scientific purposes, not for something so vulgar and base.”

*‘Your mind is opening to new possibilities. Why does this make you doubt yourself?’*

Why indeed, Raoul thought. *‘It does not matter. Why did you awaken me early?’*

*‘Your brothers will be awakening in a few hours. Before they do, you must investigate their communications.’*

Raoul forced himself not to sigh. He detested having to intrude on the private lives of the others, it was a betrayal of their trust. *‘I have already advised you of...’*

*‘There are more, my child. More that would defy my laws. More that wish harm to Iason. They have forsaken their android logic and have chosen the more Human path of envy and greed. This cannot continue.’*

*‘We are Elite, we are an arrogant and selfish kind, you have made us so, Jupiter.’* He thought of all the problems that Iason had been having. *‘If you did not wish us to emulate Humans, why give us emotions?’*

*‘I wished to emulate and understand the Human aspects of confidence, ambition and creativity.’*

Raoul smirked. *‘I would say conspiring to kill Iason reveals all of those aspects, it paves the way for them to step forward and become the head of the Syndicate, the favoured son.’*

*‘There can be no other than Iason. Their logic is flawed by their ambition, by their greed.’*

*‘I do not believe it is possible to have one without the other.’*

*‘So it seems. You and the Furniture will do a thorough investigation. They have managed to hide things from me, and that cannot be forgiven.’*

*‘What do you plan to do to them, should I discover further proof of conspiracy?’*

*‘That decision is still being calculated.*

*‘I have the right to know what punishment my betrayal of them will merit.’*

There was a long pause and for a moment, Raoul considered that he had stepped over the line with his comment, but then Jupiter spoke again. “*You feel regret for your actions?’*

*‘Not regret, more annoyance. Iason is my brother and my friend, however the others are still my brothers. In doing this, I am...we are betraying them...’*

*‘They’re betrayal of their own has warranted these actions. Do you doubt this?’*

*‘No. I know they must be held accountable and I do not agree with what they have done, but I can understand their motives.’*

*‘Can you?’*

Was that anger in Jupiter’s tone? *‘Yes. Iason is my dearest friend, but you have allowed him too much freedom Jupiter. Not only the thing with his pet, but overall you have favored him unfairly. It is natural the others would feel...envious.’*

*‘Iason was created to lead, and he has done well. He has also made mistakes and has been punished for those mistakes.’*

*‘Some would think he has not been punished enough.’*

*“Are these your thoughts?’*

*‘No.’*

Raoul had seen Iason after he had freed the mongrel the first time, and had known about the frequent sessions with Jupiter afterward. Outwardly, Iason

was the same, cold, unaffected leader he always was, but for someone who was closer to him, who could see beyond the artificial façade that Iason imposed against everyone, Raoul knew his friend's punishment had been extreme.

He had seen flickers of strain on Iason, and the fact that even that infinitesimal notification was visible was proof of the agony and stress the Syndicate Leader was undergoing. Some of the strain was no doubt because he had lost his pet, and was feeling lonely again, but that had only been a small part of it. He had tried to get Iason to talk about what was going on with Jupiter, but as always, the Blondie was closemouthed about his personal life.

*'Have you heard of Iason and Riki?'*

Raoul blinked surprised to hear Jupiter use the mongrel's name. *'Katze is on Avalon, where they were taken, and will attempt to negotiate for their release.'*

*'They will not negotiate.'*

*'What shall be done then?'*

*"What is always done when one wishes to acquire that which another possesses?"*

*'War?'* Raoul straightened. *'Jupiter, we have not gone to war since the time of the beginning. Are you sure this is something that warrants such an extreme action?'*

*'Would you have me leave Iason to them? Leave your brother in the hands of outsiders?'*

*'Of course not! We don't even know if they want Iason. From what I understand, they may only be after the mongrel, in which case we can take Iason and...'*

*'No!'*

*Raoul was shocked silent.*

*'If these people do not return both the boy and Iason, they will force me to destroy them.'*

*'He's just a pet! A mongrel!'*

Jupiter was quiet for a long time, and Raoul again worried he had offended her by his remarks, but finally she spoke.

*'There is much you do not understand. The boy must be returned to us. He is an integral part of my plan and I will not be dissuaded.'*

Cal suddenly entered and Raoul glanced over at the boy who offered small bow. "Forgive me, but I have been unable to reach Katze. I am...worried something may have happened to him."

Raoul waited a moment to see if Jupiter would say anything else, but she had apparently decided she'd said all she would say and his mind was suspiciously quiet. He set his glass on the table. "Katze will have to take care of himself, we have other work to do." He moved to the portal and programmed their destination. "Come along."

Without hesitation, Cal stepped through the portal after him.

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Katze woke with a start, covered in sweat and feeling as if he had run a marathon. What...what was that...that dream? Why had he dreamed of Raoul in that way? Why would he dream of anyone in that way? His head was pounding and his body throbbed with a strange ache. Trying to focus his blurry eyes, he found himself lying on the floor of a very dusty room.

Slowly sitting up, he hissed as pain shot up his right leg. "Shit!"

His ankle had been wrapped with some sort of bandage, but it was stained crimson from the bleeding underneath. Laying back again as dizziness assailed him, he struggled to remember what had happened.



He had joined the line up to request an audience with the King and Queen at some sort of booth outside the palace gates and was told he could have an appointment in three cycles. As a cycle was apparently every full moon, he realized that was too long to wait. He'd back tracked and tried to find another way into the palace, but it was surrounded by dark, stone walls, and guarded iron gates.

After walking for almost an hour, he found a lower section of wall that he had just managed to get over by climbing into a nearby tree. He'd dropped onto the ground and could just barely see the peaks of the palace towers in the distance. Congratulating himself on his good fortune, he started the trek towards the palace when he spotted some kind of animal running towards him. Correction, several four legged animals were running towards him, and they had pointed white teeth.

He'd quickly backed up and tried to get back over the wall, and had been hanging by his fingertips when he felt a jarring pain in his right ankle, then he was falling. Now he was lying in some shack after having some weird wet dream about an Elite. What the hell was going on?

Rolling onto his good leg, he used a nearby chair to pull himself up, and then spotted a figure lying on some sort of work bench.

“Iason!”

He surged forward, and immediately dropped to the filthy floor again in pain. He crawled to the table, lifted himself upwards again, careful not to put any weight on his right leg. Iason was laying there, still as the dead, his eyes closed.

“Iason? Iason, it's Katze. Can you hear me?”

The door creaked open and he spun around, again wincing in pain, but managing to keep himself upright this time.

“He may or may not hear you,” the tall figure stated as he ducked to step over the threshold and closed the door again, leaving them in the semi

darkness. “But feel free to talk to him. It is best to do so in his current condition.”

“You...you're an Onyx! How the hell...what are you doing here?”

“I was sent here by Jupiter to retrieve Iason.”

Katze wasn't sure whether to trust him or not. “You seem... different than the Onyx's I know.”

Shiao nodded. “I am.” He tossed Katze a small bag of loose leaves. “Eat a few, they will help with the pain.”

“Eat leaves?”

“Yes. They are Emeral leaves, they have a natural numbing ingredient that will make your injury ache less.”

“Who are you?”

“I am called Shiao.” The Onyx leaned down over Iason, lay his hand against Iason's forehead and closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

The Onyx ignored Katze and continued. Katze noticed Iason's eyelids twitch, as if he were in REM sleep, only Elite's didn't dream, that he knew of, so what was happening?

Shiao opened his eyes and stepped back again. “I am not hurting him,” he assured, seeing Katze's scowling expression. “You are protective of him, good. I will leave him in your care then.”

“That's fine, but how did you get here?”

Shiao walked around the bench and caught Katze's arm. “Sit, you are bleeding again.”

Katze stumbled over to the chair and settled upon it as the Onyx lit a couple of candles then knelt beside him and started to pull at the bandages, which were now soaked with blood. “What happened to me? I remember going over the wall and there were these animals...”

“I believe those were dogs, and one of them took a vicious bite out of you as you attempted to scale the wall.” Shiao lifted his head and smiled. “Were you looking for Iason?”

“Yes.”

Shiao nodded and used a damp cloth in a bowl on the floor that Katze hadn’t noticed before, to wipe at the flow of blood, before pressing the cloth to the wound and wrapping his large hand around it.

Katze closed his eyes and tried not to scream, as the Onyx’s fingers coiled tightly around his ankle in a crushing grip. He realized that Shiao was probably just trying to stop the blood flow, but it honestly felt like his ankle was going to snap off at any moment.

Finally the pain eased and he heard the sound of tearing cloth. His eyes shot open and he watched the Elite rip away the right sleeve of his tunic, the left was already gone and Katze realized that must have been what had made up the first bandage. The Elites he knew would never rip their clothes in such a way, certainly not in order to help or bandage a Human.

“Thank you,” he offered quietly as Shiao’s hands, now incredibly gentle, wrapped his foot.

“You are very brave not to scream. That must have hurt.”

“It did. You...have really big hands.” Katze realized that the Onyx’s fingers easily spanned his entire calf as Shiao wound the bandage with his other hand.

Shiao nodded. “I have really big everything.”

He lifted his eyes and Katze caught a flash of humor in them. Katze chuckled. "Yeah...you probably do."

Shiao rose. "How did you know about Iason being here?"

Katze stared back silently. He was grateful for the assistance, but he didn't know this Elite and he wasn't sure if he could be trusted. According to Raoul there were other Elites that were trying to harm Iason, who was to say that this wasn't one of them?

"You don't have to tell me." Shiao moved to the basket he had set down by the door when he entered and handed it to Katze. "Here is some food, you'll need to keep up your strength so when it is time to go you will be ready."

"Go?" Katze glanced at the basket of fruit and bread, then looked back up at Shiao. "Do you have a plan to get back to Amoi?"

"I have half a plan, perhaps we can come up with a full one together. Do you have a ship?"

Katze nodded, no harm in telling him that. "It won't be easy getting out of here with Iason unseen."

"No, it will not, especially as there will be more than just Iason with us."

Katze sat forward and accidentally overplayed his hand. "You know where Riki is?"

Shiao regarded him quietly. "I do, and I am under orders to retrieve him as well."

"From Jupiter?"

Shiao's lips flickered again in a small smile. "No, someone much more frightening."

Katze's eyes widened in surprise. More scary than Jupiter?

“I’ve made a promise to a friend to save Riki as well, and if I break that promise, the circumstances could be dire.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“No one you would know.” Shiao moved to the door again. “Stay off that foot and eat. Once you’ve rested start talking to Iason, it helps if he can hear your voice.”

Katze nodded. “Will he wake up?”

“I don’t know. This is a very dangerous time for him, and that is why I ask that you talk to him.”

“I will.”

Shiao opened the door, ducked through and looked back. “Thank you, Katze.”

The door closed quietly and Katze was left alone with Iason. “Well,” he sighed, then rose and managed to pull the chair and basket over to the bench so he could sit down next to Iason. “I’ve really fucked this one up, haven’t I, Iason?”

He glanced at the Blondie, hoping he would respond, but knowing he would not, and plucked a piece of bread from the basket. “Well, you can punish me later, after we get home.” He touched the scar on his cheek, he could still sometimes feel the sting of that whip on his skin. “I won’t mind. I never minded.”

No, he would take whatever punishment Iason chose to deliver because that was how Iason showed he cared. It was an illogical and obscure way of thinking, but for Katze, who had been around Iason the longest of all the other Humans, it was simply the way Iason was structured.

Iason could be cold and unfeeling, there was very little that he truly cared about or had any reaction to so if he chose to punish you for something, if you managed to anger or disappoint him, that meant on some level, at some

point you had also pleased him and made him proud. Iason only ever lashed out in frustration when you were not living up to his expectations. And for a Blondie like him to have expectations, any expectations of a Furniture outside of doing their duty was a gift. At least, that was how Katze saw it. It made you want to work that much harder to please him, to elevate his expectations of you, and that was all Katze had been working towards these last years. Making Iason truly proud of him.

Katze liked belonging to Iason, he was proud of the fact that Iason chose him, trusted him with such important things. It was more than just an owner and a Furniture, although he would obey Iason's every command without hesitation. Iason had shown him compassion and understanding when no one else ever bothered to. Iason had been the only one to see potential in him and act on it.

He didn't understand the relationship the Blondie had with Riki, but nor was he envious of it. What he felt for Iason wasn't attraction or love, Katze could never feel either of those for anyone, but there was still a strong bond between them. It was undefinable, and pure and only for Iason. If he had to put a name to the feeling, he would probably just call it familiar. He wanted Iason to be proud of him, but accepted that Iason would never ever confirm that sentiment. He was okay with that, as long as Iason still felt it.

Taking a bite of the bread he tried to think of what else he could talk to Iason about, then decided to give him a run down on the latest numbers from their recent black market deals; that would take an hour at least.

He blinked suddenly and glanced at the door. Shiao had used his name when he said goodbye, but Katze couldn't remember telling the Onyx what his name was. How had he known?

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Iason rose from the table upon which he lay as blue smoke moved slowly towards him. It curled around his feet and playfully rose to nip at his thighs and he experienced a strange sensation of uncertainty, before pressing forward to find the origin of the smoke.

He had only gone two steps when the smoke cleared and he was in a strange alleyway, where a figure huddled in a corner. Riki? Surging forward he reached out to touch the figure, but his hand passed through and could not get a solid grip. What...what was this?

“Shion!”

Iason turned and stared as a very tall, dark headed figure appeared and bent to pluck the sobbing figure from the ground.

“We must go. We cannot stay here!”

“Go where?” the one names Shion cried as he found his feet. “The demon is everywhere. There is nowhere to hide!”

Iason saw, as both men now stood, that they were alike. Each as tall as the other, each with long, choppy black hair. Twins? These were not Human, though they looked very much so, with the exception of their height. Could they be androids? Elites even? But Elites did not behave in such a way, so this was impossible.

“We will be crushed, like insects!” the first twin insisted. “We are insects! Useless, unworthy...”

“No!” the second twin growled, angrily and Iason found something annoyingly familiar about the man, yet he could not place it. “We are more than that. We can be so much more than what we were created for!”

“No!” Shion refused and grabbed his head. “We are nothing! Oh, the agony! What are these feelings? Why will they not stop? Why do they change so...” He started laughing suddenly, loud, raucous laughter that held no real amusement.

Iason stepped back, oddly disturbed by the strange hysteria the first twin was displaying. The sound was not funny at all, it was the sound of madness and fear.

“Shion!” The first twin gripped the other and shook him hard. “You must bear with it, my brother. We are almost there, just a few more blocks and we will be free!”

“F...Free?” Shion placed his pale hand against the others face. “I would live free with you, my dearest brother. To be with you...always.”

Iason noticed a bright blue light appearing on the horizon over the buildings and seemed to cause the very air around them to pulse with a strange foreboding vibration.

“We are out of time!” The two joined hands and started running through the streets. They ducked into a building and scaled numerous stairs to a rooftop where a small ship sat waiting. “Hurry, Shion!”

Iason had found himself being pulled behind them, unable to stop moving forward, even as that eerie blue light grew brighter and expanded, casting its glow over the surrounding buildings. There was something dangerous in that light, something frightening. He had never been frightened of anything, ever and yet...and yet he wanted to get away from that light.

He climbed through the hatch after the twins and watched as Shion dropped into one of the seats as his brother took to the controls, quickly and efficiently readying the ship for departure. The vessel started to vibrate and shake, but it was more than just the engines heating up, it was like a hole was opening up beneath them and trying to suck them down into it.

The blue light started to encompass the ship, so that everything inside was tinted to its horrific shade. Iason, uncommonly frightened moved closer to the front as the light edged its way through the back of the ship.

“Hurry, Shiao!” Shion cried even as the ship started to lift off, but just then the blue light reached him and he screamed.



The ship lurched upwards at incredible speeds and burst into the sky and away from the city as Shion's screaming suddenly stopped. The pilot turned to look back at his brother, as did Iason, to find only an empty gaze staring back from their passenger.

The pilot pulled back on the throttle as they shot through the atmosphere, and released a horrific cry of despair as the stars of space appeared around them.

Iason reached up to his face and found it wet. Were these tears? How was this possible, he thought as darkness claimed him once again.

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Carrie accepted the handful of thin material that would be her costume for the Festival. She hadn't had to work very hard to convince them that she could be a dancing girl, the moment the man in charge saw her he accepted the idea immediately.

Granted, the call had been for exotic dancing girls, and she saw no one else that was as exotic looking as she was. She worried at first that she might run into one of the men she had taken down back on Amoï, and they would make the connection to her natural form, but so far, every face was new.

Her appearance was mostly Human, in fact anyone from the market places might still recognize her, but for the tawny tint of her skin, the mane of coal black hair and the dark marks across her arms and face which were more faded than her regular stripes. Most were assuming the intricate lines were tattoos of course, which added to her exotic appeal.

However, maintaining a half mutated form was extremely tiring and difficult, so she had requested a dark, secure room every four hours for religious purposes. This allowed her to transform fully to either Human or Beast, and relieve herself of the painful stinging feeling that crawled through her skin while she was only half mutated.

They provided her a dark room, which they locked her into, which had a shield for the two windows to block the sun. It was implausible to them that

she could escape, or that she would want to, as it was in one of the towers. She would make some vocal sounds as if she were chanting in prayer, getting softer and softer until she was completely silent, knowing that the guards would not find in suspicious, then she would become a cat and leap up to the windows and crawl down the tower.

Today was one such excursion, and she had already spotted Riki walking with an impossibly beautiful woman in the gardens, but could not get close enough to him without risking revealing herself. He looked in good health and uninjured, so she had to trust him to take care of himself for the time being.

She continued her canvasses across the treetops that boarded the palace, leaping from one to the other and picking up pieces of conversations as she went. Mostly snippets of everyday life, nothing helpful, and people were discussing the newly found prince or the festival. Finally, on her way back to the tower room, she spotted two guards carrying a long, bulky looking wrapped bundle into what appeared to be some kind of cellar. They disappeared underground, then returned a few minutes later, without the bundle.

“Is that the last of it?” one of the guards asked the other as they secured the cellar doors.

“That’s it,” the other replied grimly. “Although it will all be wasted if this kid is the real Maku.”

“Yeah, but Sarrum wants to be sure and he needs a backup if something goes wrong.”

“Have you seen him? He looks too much like them not to be the real deal.”

“Yeah, but he has to accept his place willingly before the Harvest, or Sarrum will have no choice but to use this.”

“I hope he is the real deal.” The second guard sighed heavily.

“Why? What does it matter?”

“If he is the real Maku, we won’t have to gather anymore resources, but also the King and Queen will finally be happy again.”

“Yeah, that would be nice to see.”

A heavy lock was attached to the solid floor aligned doors and the two men started to move away.

Carrie hopped down from the trees and moved to the doors. She pulled at the lock but it was solid and there were no windows to see down into the cellar. Putting her nose against the wood, she inhaled deeply, then suddenly stumbled backwards. Something definitely didn’t smell right here. There was more to this place than what could be seen.

She hurried back towards the trees and leapt into them. What was this Harvest they were talking about? Did it have anything to do with the current festival and why was Riki so important for it? Were the royals going to do something bad to her friend and why hadn’t she been able to spot any sign of Iason? Had they killed him, destroyed him, sent him back to Amoï? She never should have left him, she should have waited.

“Damnit!” she swore as she leapt for the tower and climbed down through the window she had left open, just as there was the sound of a key turning in the lock at the door.

## Chapter 26

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki learns Iason is gone, Shiao reflects on his link with a Blondie, Jupiter learns of the one who betrayed Iason and the plot thickens...:@) chuckle.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to your patience everyone, I had a hard time writing lately, as I explained horribly blocked, but there are a lot of personal issues that have gotten in the way as well. I hope you find it worth the wait. If so, please let me know by commenting, as it is really all I have to look forward to lately. Your feedback is what keeps me inspired to write so if you are enjoying it and want more TELL ME SO!! :-) I am not above begging.

"Run son!"

His father grabbed his hand and they started running, but he couldn't keep up and kept tripping over his own feet. Strong arms scooped him up and as they did, his eyes also rose and stared at the massive ship that appeared over them.

P...Papa?" he sobbed as his father dodged into a thicket of trees, never broke his stride until they were well inside the brush, then he stopped by a particularly large tree.

"Climb, son. Climb as high as you can but stay under the canopy."

"Papa!"

"Do as I say!" His father held him close for a moment, then hefted him up so the he could reach the lowest branch. "Keep climbing and don't look

down. Stay there until I come for you, do you hear me?"

"Papa! Don't leave me!"

"I have to."

His father glanced backwards at the sound of something moving through the trees. "Stop crying, son. You have to be brave now."

"B...but..."

"Son, you have to climb now. I am your father and you must listen to me. Climb to the highest branch below the canopy and don't look back." His father reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, cloth wrapped parcel. "No more tears and no noise, do you understand? Climb up and be absolutely silent until I come for you."

He took the cloth, shoved it in his pocket, and started to climb.

"There's my brave boy. Not a sound now. You can do this. I'll be back for you."

He couldn't look down, he had to keep climbing, but he thought he heard his father say 'I love you,' before there was more rustling below. The rough wood of the branches scratched at his face and arms, it hurt and his eyes became blurry, but he pushed back the need to cry. Papa had said no tears and no noise.

There was a thumping noise from below and then a strange grinding or gurgling, but he wasn't allowed to look back. He couldn't look back. He had to climb. Higher and higher, until he reached a layer of leaves that he could push his little hand through and find air. The canopy?

Turning, he found a good place to sit and finally looked down. The ground was so far away he almost couldn't see it, and there were shadows below, shadows that frightened him. Fear gripped him as he wrapped his tiny arms as far around the huge tree trunk as he could and waited.

The sounds below continued, unfamiliar, alien and so very terrifying. He started to shake as the sounds grew louder, but he did not cry. A bright beam of light shone through the trees, brighter than the sun and illuminated the strange shadows on the ground below.

His eyes widened in horror but he was unable to tear his gaze away, still he did not cry. His body shook in terror, but he did not let go of the tree. He was a good boy and he would make no noise. Papa would come back and be so proud of him for not crying, for being good and quiet, for climbing to the very top of the tree.

The bright lights dimmed, darkness fell hard and fast and finally gave his traumatized eyes the chance to rest. He blinked once, twice and felt his body grow cold and numb, the pain in his chest lessened and his exhausted arms released the tree. The sun rose again at some point and he could better see the ground below. Instinct screamed at him to climb down in the sunlight, but fear prevented him moving closer to the ground. He didn't ever want to come out of this tree, not ever.

The sun dipped again, and with it the heat of the day crawled away to be replaced by a near freezing night. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, relieved that he could no longer see the ground. Maybe he could climb down now, but there was not even a moon to see by, what if he fell? Papa had told him to stay. Papa had said to wait for him to come back.

He was so tired, so very tired, but every time he closed his eyes, he heard strange noises and would be wide awake again; afraid of what might get him as he slept. Finally, when the sun started to rise again, he knew he had to climb down. It seemed to take forever to reach the ground, the closer he got to it the more he shook and the faster his heart pounded in his chest.

Reaching the lowest branch, which was still very high of the ground, he looked down, then up at where he had climbed to, then back down. No. No, nononononono. He couldn't do it. He couldn't let go. He didn't want to go down there. What if they were still there, hiding and waiting for him?

The wrapped parcel his father had given him slipped from his pocket and he tried to catch it, only then remembering he had it, but the action made him

lose his precarious balance on the branch. He caught hold at the last second, watched the parcel hit the ground and slip open, revealing a small, square of chocolate.

Food! His stomach growled and his little arms protested as he dangled from the branch, staring at the half-hidden treat. But the cakes were right next to...to...He closed his eyes fearfully, but exhaustion and hunger won. Dropping the least few feet his shoes hit the ground, but his tired legs were not enough to support him. He fell forward and started screaming,

Riki's eyes opened slowly, then closed again. Once more they opened. His lids felt heavy, his body unresponsive. He lolled his head to the side and spotted Yilea's now familiar face as she dipped a cloth into a pretty blue and white bowl. With eyes that seemed stretched and detached he watched her smile at him as she lay the cool cloth across his forehead.

"You are awake, Maku." She moved the cloth to one side of his face, then the other. "Do you feel better?"

He couldn't answer her. His tongue felt swollen and it seemed like he had swallowed half of a desert. He felt weird, detached from his body. Don't touch me, he wanted to cry, and his lips parted but no sound came out. What was this? What had they done to him?

His breathing quickened in a growing panic, and his head lolled to the other side and found a familiar pair of eyes watching him. Guy! Guy was here, so it couldn't be that bad right? They hadn't moved him somewhere away from Iason? Iason!

Eyes frantically scanned the room, but he just couldn't see enough of it and he couldn't sit up. His lips parted but barely a croak slid through and he glared at Guy, demanding to know what was going on.

"It's okay, Riki," he assured and reached for Riki's hand, wrapped it in both of his larger ones. "They gave you something to calm you down. You were screaming and thrashing in your sleep."

"We worried you might injure yourself, Maku," Yilea stated softly as she bathed his face, then set the cloth aside and put her palm to his forehead. "Your fever has decreased." She picked up a cup from the bedside table and slid her arm beneath his shoulders to help him sit up slightly. "Drink this, it will negate the effects of the sedative."

Riki drank it because he wanted this horrible loss of control to be rectified, but it did not taste good and he screwed up his face automatically as he swallowed.

Yilea smiled and set the cup down. "You never did like to take your medicine," she said affectionately, and rose to pull the covers a little higher over him. "I will go advise the Queen you are awake."

Whatever was in the drink was already starting to take effect and he was able to lift himself enough to watch one of the guards standing inside the room open the door for her, then firmly close it again and resume his position.

"Ia..." Riki said to Guy, but his speech wasn't quite back yet.

"I'm sorry, Riki." Guy glared at the guards then turned back to Riki and lowered his head. "Someone took him."

"Wha..." Riki tried to sit up more, tried to get off the bed, but he didn't have enough energy yet. "Ho..."

"Someone came into the room, attacked me and took him away." Guy pointed to the huge bruise covering the left side of his face and blackening his half opened-eye.

When he had told Shiao to hit him, he hadn't realized it would hurt so much. The fact that the Onyx had only slapped him and had not intended to do any real damage made him all too aware how strong the android must really be.

"Hav...Ge..." Riki growled in frustration and Guy rose and walked around to the other side of the bed to pick up the cup.



"Here, drink some more, maybe it will help."

Riki took the cup and drained it dry, ignoring the taste because he needed to feel normal again. Iason was gone. Had the Queen taken him, or the King? Were they testing him, or trying to use Iason to keep him here? He never should have trusted them. He should have known they would lie and do something to Iason the minute he was away.

A surge of strength tingled through him and he sat up and slid his legs over the bed, just as the doors opened and the Queen and King entered. Fury caused him to leap to his feet, but his legs would not yet support him and Guy caught him around the waist to help his balance.

"B...bitch!" he snarled, hating the fact that he had to cling to Guy to remain standing. "Where...is...he?"

"We did not take the android." Nathaniel stated quietly. "None of my people were ordered to move him."

"L...liar! Give...him...back!"

Nathaniel pulled his shoulders back, angrily. "I am not accustomed to being challenged or called a liar. I speak the truth."

Celestia stepped forward and spread her hands. "Please, Riki. It is true. We found your friend unconscious on the floor with one of the guards when we returned you to your room. He said someone had come through the balcony, and the seal had been broken. Whoever that was has taken away your Iason."

"It's true, Riki." Guy hated to side with this people, hated lying to Riki, but he needed everyone to be calm so that they would leave them alone and he could tell Riki the truth."

Obsidian eyes bore into Guy's. "Who?"

Had Carrie rescued Iason? She could probably scale the walls easily enough, but was she strong enough to carry off Iason? Who else could do

it? Who else would benefit from...His eyes narrowed on Guy and he watched his old friend's gaze dart away as realization dawned. Guy had said he was here with another Elite. Had that Elite taken away Iason? If that were true, why would he leave Guy behind, why would he hurt Guy if they had come here together?

Guy could see the scenarios running around in Riki's head, just by the slight widening or narrowing of his friend's eyes. He knew Riki had figured out the truth, but he also knew that Riki's mistrust would lead him down the road of accusation he had been trying to avoid.

"I don't know," he lied quietly, but his eyes pleaded with Riki to wait until they were alone to explain.

Riki held Guy's gaze for a moment longer, then motioned towards the bed and Guy helped him settle back down upon it. He turned his attention to the two other people in the room and as he focused his heart started to pound. There was something he was supposed to remember. Something important, what was it?

"What happened?" he demanded, his voice finally sounding almost normal.

"We know only what you do..." Nathaniel began.

"Before!" he snapped. "I mean...we were in a kitchen. What happened after that? How did I get back here?"

Celestia moved forward and sat next to him on the massive bed, leaving enough space between them that he would not feel uncomfortable. "I am not certain. You seemed well enough, but then you just collapsed." She glanced back at her husband then turned to Riki again. "You were screaming for a long time, they had to sedate you. Did you have a nightmare? Do you remember what it was about?"

He stared at her, hard, glanced at the King, then back at her. "No. I don't remember anything." That was mostly true. He remembered bits of his dream, but there was one thing that seemed fuzzy. One thing he knew he should be remembering, but when he tried his head ached, much like those

first sessions with Jupiter when she tried to access his memories. "I'm hungry. Can we have something to eat?"

Celestia smiled as if he had just given her a diamond tiara. "Of course! I'll have the dining hall prepared! We can all eat as a family as we once..."

"Here. I want to eat here."

Her smile slipped slightly, but other than that she still appeared pleasant. "Of course. You must still be tired. I'll have food brought to you both."

"What about the deal?" Riki demanded as she turned away towards the door. "You said you were considering it." His cold eyes turned to the King. "Did you?"

Nathaniel nodded. "Yes. We will honour your request. I have my guards searching for the abductor, they will not be able to hide the android easily here, and once we have found it, we will send it back to its home planet right away."

Riki released a long breath and lowered his eyes. "Thank you."

Guy watched surprise flicker in the King's eyes.

"And you will keep your end of the bargain? You will stay here with us and not try to run away?"

"For now," Riki replied. "I can't promise more than that."

"You owe us at least that much..." Nathaniel began and then paused as Celestia put a hand on his arm. They exchanged a long look, then Celestia spoke.

"That is enough for now," she decided and smiled at them again. "The food will be here shortly. I shall send all your favorites!"

"You don't know my favorites," Riki reminded harshly and felt a pang of guilt as the smile finally slipped completely from her face.

"Well then...I'll send you a bit of everything so you'll have to tell me which ones you like best." She turned away again as the guards opened the doors again. "You may give them some privacy," she told the men as she and the King passed through, and a moment later Guy and Riki were alone in the room.

Guy caught Riki's swing before it could connect with his face.

"Where is Iason? What have you fucking done this time?" Riki swung with his free hand, but Guy ducked and spun so that he suddenly had his arms wrapped around Riki from behind.

"Stop it!" Guy hissed as Riki struggled. He was lucky that the mongrel wasn't up to his usual strength or he would be toast. Guy was tall and muscular, and he knew how to fight, but it was Riki who had taught him, and the only way Riki would lose between them was if he wanted to.

Guy immediately recalled the night Riki had confessed to him about Iason Mink and his role as a pet. He'd been so furious, so outraged and hurt that he had pummeled Riki, and Riki had stood there, at some point laid there and took the beating. He closed his eyes, ashamed, and his arms tightened on Riki's struggling form.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"What did you do?" Riki hissed, angrily. "What did you do to Iason?"

"No. I mean, yeah. I mean, I'm sorry about hitting you before."

Riki stilled, confused. "What? When?"

"Before. When you told me about Mink the first time. I...I hurt you and you...you let me."

"Yeah." Riki sighed heavily and he placed his hands against the arms pinning his chest. "It's okay. I...hurt you first."

He had hurt Guy by wanting to find a life outside of the slums. He'd left his pairing partner behind to work for Katze and never even said goodbye.

Then when he returned three years later, instead of being grateful for being able to see Guy again, he kept his friend at arm's length because of the shame he felt after what Iason had done to him.

"Yeah," Guy whispered and lowered his chin to rest atop Riki's head. 'I fucked up. I'm really, really sorry.' His arms squeezed Riki. "I....really miss you."

"I know." Riki stood silently in Guy's arms, giving the taller mongrel a moment of pleasure and peace, before he started to pull away, relieved that he was almost immediately released. Maybe Guy had changed. He turned to face Guy. "Where is Iason?"

"I really don't know, but I'm sure he's safe. Shiao is an Onyx and Jupiter sent him here to rescue Iason." Guy shrugged and dropped down onto the bed. "I was with him when he got the call or message or whatever and the next thing I know we're running across the tarmac and jumping onto a space ship in mid lift off."

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"Because I knew you would freak out if you came back and found us both gone. I knew you'd blame me for it and I...I didn't want that."

Riki indicated Guy's bruise. "He give you that for staying?"

"No. I asked him to hit me so that they wouldn't suspect anything." He lifted his gaze to Riki's again. "And...I guess so you wouldn't suspect me either."

Riki settled beside him. "So he's taking Iason back to Amoī?"

Guy shook his head. "Not yet."

"Why the hell not? Iason needs to get to Jupiter!"

"I know! But I..." Guy looked down at his hands. "I asked him to wait and take you too."

"Guy!"

"Don't be pissed!" Guy caught Riki's hand, desperately. "Do you really think I could just leave you behind? Do you think I've changed that much? Come on, man! You're my fucking best friend!"

Riki took a few deep breaths to calm himself. No, Guy couldn't leave him behind, any more than he could cut off his right arm. His eyes widened suddenly as he remembered what Iason had done to Guy and he reached up to touch the mongrel's shoulder, then the other. "Your arm. How...how do you have both?"

Guy grinned, using his thumbnail he slid it under the near invisible panel on his wrist and pulled back the artificial skin to show Riki the circuits. "Shiao got it for me, about a year or so after I started working for him. He said it was better for me to have both so I could do more things for him?"

Riki's gaze lifted. "And what sort of *things* do you do for him, exactly?"

Guy's face shuttered and he quickly closed the panel. "Not that!" he snapped. "Not all Elites are perverts like Mink."

"Actually, they are," Riki tossed. "But yeah, there aren't any others that have actual sex with their pets."

"Stop it!" Guy rose and rubbed his arms as if he was cold. "I don't want to hear about that." He strode across the room to the balcony, saw that whatever seal had been there before had been repaired. "Shiao will come back for us, and we have to be ready. We just need to keep in their good graces until then."

Riki watched him for a moment then looked back at the door of the room. "Yeah, well I hope he comes soon." Staying here was not an option, not just because of Iason, or the fact he was abducted, there was something else nagging him. Something that made his heart race and his palms sweat. Something that told him staying here would wind up with him in a worse position than what he faced in Tanagura.

"Holy shit!"

Riki bolted up from the bed as Guy stumbled back from the glass windows, in time to see a familiar lioness's face peering in. "Carrie!" He raced over to the doors, but they would not budge.

Her eyes brightened at seeing him and she exposed a set of razor sharp teeth which he figured was supposed to be a smile.

"Are you okay?" he asked through the glass, but when she put her ear to the window, he realized she could not hear him. "Shit!" He glanced around for something to write with and spotted some textured paper and a strange feathered pen.

"What is that?" Guy demanded alarmed.

"A friend," Riki assured and pressed the tip of the quill to the paper but there was no ink. He spotted a small jar of black liquid and dipped the tip inside of it, then pressed it to the paper. Yes! He quickly scrawled a message, giving no time to consider how he knew how to make the feather write.

He grabbed the jar, moved back to the window and handed the jar to Guy before turning the paper to face Carrie.

*Are you okay?*

She grinned again and nodded then started searching around the doors to find a way to break in.

"Tits. I can totally see her tits man! What's up with that?"

Riki ignored him as he scrawled another message and held it up.

*Doors sealed. Have you seen Iason?*

She shook her head and turned around as if searching for something, then she suddenly leapt off the balcony and disappeared into a nearby tree.

"She has a tail! She has a fucking tail!" Guy almost smeared his face against the glass as he tried to catch another glance of the strange creature. "How the hell do you have friends like that, man?" He glanced down at himself and stepped back. "Fuck, I'm total hard."

"Deal with it later!" Riki snapped, although his lips twitched in mild amusement at Guy's reaction. His had not been much better when he first saw Carrie in her original form. He watched and waited, glancing at the door every few seconds. "Come on, Carrie."

Finally, she reappeared with a flat piece of wood, which she turned towards the window. She had used her nails to scratch a message.

*No Iason. : ( New dancing girl.*

Riki's gaze flickered from the message to Carrie's, confused, and she pointed to herself. Scowling he added a message to his own sheet.

???

She smiled and clicked her nail against the wood. Riki continued to read.

*Make sexy moves. You pick me. I'll save you. : )*

He stared at her confused and he didn't have to write a message for her to understand he was puzzled.

"What the fuck is she talking about?" Guy demanded, stepping closer, then quickly moved his hands in front of himself when her eyes lowered and she wagged her finger at him.

"I...I don't know."

Carrie used her nails to scratch more letters on the wood and turned it to him.

*Ask about harvest.*



Both men turned at the sound of the lock turning in the chamber door and then frantically back to the window, but Carrie was already gone.

"What?" Guy began as Yilea and three serving girls entered with trays of steaming hot dishes, effectively blocking Riki as he shoved the paper and feather up his shirt, while Guy slid the ink well behind his back.

"Later," Riki muttered as they moved away from the window towards the delicious smelling food.

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Shiao had adjusted his 'distraction ploy' for a later time until he could figure out how to get Riki and Guy away from the castle. He returned to the shed where he had left Iason every hour or so to lend him telepathic support, the problem was that the link went both ways and so he had received some of Iason's deepest memories and emotions in return.

His love for the mongrel ran deep, far deeper than Shiao had believed any Elite capable of feeling. He had adored his pet Terian and had grown quite comfortable with him, but he'd ever had this sort of intensity of feeling that Iason had for Riki. Terian's death was disappointing, but he'd never mourned the loss, never let it affect him in any way really other than the decision to not bother with another pet. He imagined what if Riki died? How would Iason feel about losing the pet he was so fond of? Would the Blondie survive or might he attempt self-destruction?

Such choices were not in their programming, however, after just a few times inside Iason Mink's chaotic mind he could see that the Blondie had gone well beyond what Jupiter had created and had already broken many of the barriers that had been especially erected to keep them from becoming too Human.

Shiao had never understood the concept of love, dedication or blinding self-sacrifice to save another. Their main function was to survive, to exist, and putting themselves in mortal danger for the good of another seemed arbitrary and illogical. Yet, he had read in Iason's mind a snippet of such an act, a memory of fire and helplessness alongside acceptance and relief. The

entire episode had been too brief for him to understand the full scope of the situation, but just from Iason's emotions alone, he knew that the android had somehow sacrificed his life, or tried to, to save his pet, and that Iason had been contented with his choice.

The idea that such depth of emotion from one of their own was possible intrigued him and made him wonder what would happen if he allowed the harness, he so tightly tied his own emotions to, be released. Initially he had believed that allowing one's emotions to run unchecked was evil, as it had ended the existence for all of his original brethren, but it seemed that it was possible to live without such safeguards, and live well. Iason was proof of that.

It had been so long since he had allowed himself to feel anything beyond a surface emotion, too long possibly, because when the brief glimpse he was receiving of Iason's feelings caused such chaos in him that it was difficult to contain. He found himself think of scenarios that were inconceivable. Sex with a Human, love for a Human, these things were difficult enough to analyze but he had also glimpsed the stark loneliness inside of Iason.

Iason was different from the other Elites and he was well aware of it. Perhaps Jupiter had been wrong in setting him apart, and in adding traits from a defective Elite to the supposed savior of Tanagura? Had his own instability caused Iason to become the unpredictable and formidable Blondie that so many respected and fear? Had those same traits also caused Iason to feel the envy, hatred and jealousy of others more intensely, resulting in an abhorrent feeling of seclusion and isolation?

Shiao knew that feeling well, having lived the first three decades of his freedom from Jupiter away from everything, animal, alien and Human. It had been a horrible time for him, no one to talk to, no way to feed the thirst for knowledge that was part of his very being, or to serve others, as per his original programing. Fifty years alone and outcast had caused him to bury his emotions as far down as possible, because emotions brought pain and regret. When he had finally stopped running from Jupiter and from who he was, emerged in what he defined as a better creation.

Adapting to his new environment on an alien world, he quickly acclimated new skills and a better understanding of Humans as well as other races. He understood the importance of serving others, but also of serve one's self first. Working hard where he could and investing wisely, he soon became the owner of several companies, until expansion required the occasional visit to his home planet.

He remained hidden, a mystery too many of his business associates, and tried his best to stay under Jupiter's radar, but on one trip she learned of him somehow and had demanded an audience. Knowing she could kill him with one thought, he had no choice but to obey. Think he was going to his doom, and surprisingly ready for it after so many years of freedom, he had been shocked to learn that she had called him not to end his life, but to help him create a new one.

She had been aware of him for several years, but had left him in Peace as she had felt some regret over her decision to terminate his brothers. He had done well on his own and she was pleased with his progress, and she offered to remove the chip, which tied him to her, if he would assist her with a new project.

It was not a command, but an offer and he was free to decline, but if he did so, the chip would remain and he would never know when she might use it; he might never be able to return to Amoï. So, he allowed her to remove a small piece of his brain and implant it in the body of a new creation. Along with a sample of his more evolved programming, they created the leader of Tanagura, Iason Mink.

Shiao was not so sentimental to think of Iason as his, but he could not deny a feeling of pride at the wealth and power that Iason had amassed. Now, having shared some of Iason's memories, his pride had started to turn to regret. Iason had done well, adapted as he had done, but he had also suffered for it, and Shiao would have wished to avoid that. If there were flaws with Iason Mink, it was due to his own inconsistent programming, and that bothered Shiao for some reason.

Iason should awake soon, he hoped, and he wasn't at all sure how he should approach the Elite. It would have been much easier to take Iason back to

Amoï and let him awaken with Jupiter, after Shiao and Guy were far, far away, but that would not be the case. Iason would awaken here, quickly learn that his pet was still a prisoner, and the only ones he had to rely on was a banished Onyx and a mongrel who had castrated his pet tried to kill him, twice.

He shook his head at how complicated things had become and blamed the shared link he'd had to establish with Iason for the fact that he could not properly calculate a solid plan of escape, where everyone could get back home.

Coming to the wall that surrounded the palace grounds, and where he had found the injured redheaded mongrel a few hours earlier, he quickly scaled the wall in one leap and landed on the other side. He remained crouched waited, and a moment later the sound of growling, yapping beasts hurried towards them. Four large, black dogs charged him, he closed his eyes then opened them again and a colored strobe light emitted from both eye sockets, as well as a high-pitched hum from Shiao's throat.

The dogs paused suddenly in their charge, looked at him, then at each other, whined, and then lowered to crawl towards him on their bellies.

Shiao allowed his eyes to return to normal and reached out to stroke the head of the first dog, as it reached him. "Good boys," he said gently. "I have an important task for you."

The dogs rolled onto their backs submissively and lolled their tongues, eager to please their new master.

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Raoul watched from the shadows as the Elites exited the Emersion Chamber three and four at a time, each of them wearing an expression of pleasant serenity that he found he envied. His eleven brothers were the last to leave, walking out fully dressed and in pairs, and Raoul closed his eyes to push away the spark of guilt that rose inside of him.

Once the last of them had departed, he slid through to Jupiter's main viewing chamber. He and Cal had been through each and everyone one of the Blondie's accounts, had quietly invaded their offices and home space and thoroughly reviewed all of their personal secrets, then left the areas exactly as they had found them so his brothers would not realize his treachery.

They would know soon enough, because he had to report what he found to Jupiter, and once she knew, his betrayal of them would be revealed. Despite that, what he had found had disturbed him far more than he had expected it to. His brothers were not perfect by any means, despite it being the reason for their creation; still some of them were far more deviant than what could easily be accepted, even by their society. He'd been outraged at their gall of judging Iason for keeping a pet like Riki, when their own deeds were far more abhorrent. The sheer hypocrisy of it was disappointing and helped to alleviate a good portion of the initial guilt he'd felt at his intrusion into their personal lives.

The door slid shut behind him and he walked towards the silver tower in the middle of the room. A moment later, the tower hummed, and a holographic, cybernetic vision appeared.

*What have you learned?*

"There is only one that was involved in the pet's kidnapping."

*Who?*

"Issac."

*Iassac?* Jupiter's hologram flickered. *He is the less agitated over Iason's situation.*

"Or so it appeared."

He too had been shocked to discover secret, coded messages between his third brother and some off-worlder, discussing a plot to abduct Iason Mink's pet. Issac had given these people security codes and special identification to

get past the general security screening and to set up a stall in the market place. There had been others, set up in various 'positions' around Tanagura that would not have been possible without the help of a Blondie. It was a blatant violation of syndicate rules, not to mention a direct betrayal of one of their own.

Issac had always rose to defend Iason when other complained about him. He was always pleasant and eager to help Iason, or any of them really, in anything they needed done. Iassac had become somewhat of a mascot for the Blondies, he was one of them, but his cheerful demeanor and his horrible Human habit of cracking very bad jokes set him apart from the others. Even though the thirteen brothers were meant to be equal in all things, with the exception of Iason who became their leader, Raoul had always thought of Issac as a younger brother, and he was as close to that brother than he was to any of the others, save for Iason.

"There is an old Earth adage. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I guess Issac learned to do that well."

*You are disturbed that he is the betrayer.*

Raoul nodded. "Although, I feel there must have been an instigator. Someone who suggested he do this? Iassac is easily led, so it behooves the fact that..."

*He was alone in this.*

"How can you know that?"

*I suspected from the link. I could feel that there were things that he was hiding from me. I had hoped I was wrong. There was no indication of other involvement.*

"What will you do?" Raoul continued to speak aloud, rather than use the telepathic link they all shared with Jupiter. He hoped saying it, speaking of it, would help him accept it.

*I will deal with it.*

"Will you terminate him?"

Jupiter's image flickered again, and when she solidified, she moved forward so that she was merely inches away from Raoul.

*Why is that your concern?*

"He did wrong, I understand that and I am very angry at him, but...he had to have a reason. He had to..." He paused. "I suspect that I know what the reason was."

*Tell me.*

"Issac was the only one of us that Iason treated...well."

*Does he not treat you well? Are you not friends?*

"We are yes, but, it is different. We have trust and comradeship, and I know that he enjoys our time together. However, with Issac he is..." Raoul searched for an appropriate word. "Kind."

*You believe Issac's motives against the boy are based on jealousy.*

"I think Issac was Iason's favorite, and I think that he began to recognize he was losing that position with the pet around."

*An interesting, conclusion.*

"Will it affect your final judgement?"

*No. The decision has been made.*

Raoul nodded. Jupiter was their creator, logic was her mainstay and she could be incredibly cold when it came to such things. "May I make a request?"

*You may.*

"Will you delay punishment until Iason has returned? He has the right to face Iassac, to understand the truth."

Jupiter's hologram flickered for a moment again.

*Agreed.*

Raoul hesitated, wondering if he should reveal the other things he'd learned about his brothers, then decided that unless Jupiter requested it, he would keep it to himself. Besides, he had an idea on how to deal with any future attacks on Iason's character from the other Blondie's.

*You have done well.*

Raoul watched as a wall at the far end of the chamber opened to reveal a clear capsule.

*You will be rewarded.*

Raoul quickly removed his clothes and stepped into the capsule, watching it seal shut. "Thank you, Jupiter," he murmured, even as he felt the purity of her essence entering his mind and gave himself up to it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Riki and Guy ate quietly as Yilea and two other girls served them at the breakfast table in the chamber. Riki was going over and over in his mind how to get away so he could find Iason and make sure that he was okay. He couldn't trust Guy's word that this Shiao would protect Iason and was helping him through the Deep Sleep. He had to find out for himself.

It was frustrating not having anyone he could really rely on, except Iason. He would always have Iason. And Carrie, he realized and tried to understand their brief interaction earlier. She obviously had some sort of plan to get close to him, but that concerned him because she could easily be hurt or killed if they realized she was trying to help him.

Atop that, he couldn't get his dream out of his head. He could only remember pieces of it, but what there were was enough for the thin seed of



trust that had slowly begun to sow had been ripped apart. There was no one he couldn't trust here, not the handmaids, not the King and Queen and, especially, not Guy.

"What is the Harvest?" Riki asked one of the girl's suddenly, after Yilea stepped outside the chamber.

"The Harvest is what we celebrate every year," she replied, appearing pleased to be pulled into a conversation with her Prince. "It is the main reason for the Festival. Once everyone has had a good time, filled their bellies and laughed and dance, then we all get to work bringing in the crops."

"So...it's an annual celebration?"

"Yes."

"And everyone is allowed to go to it?"

"Of course!"

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why have a festival? Spending a lot of money and shit seems like a waste."

"Not at all! It is how the Royal Family thank the hard work of their people."

Riki stared at her. "I don't understand."

"It's their reward, for their loyalty to the land."

"Loyalty? Aren't they slaves? Don't they have to work no matter what?"

"Of course not! We haven't had slaves since the beginning times!"

"What about the Royal Family's slaves?"

"Who do you mean?"

"Well, like you, and the people in the kitchen and the women that are told to dress them and bathe them and shit? Aren't all of you servants?"

The girl lowered to a kneeling position in front of him. "Maku, of course we do serve the Royal Family, we do so proudly, and they pay us a good wage to look after their needs. They do not own us and we are not obligated to fetch and carry for them. We take on these tasks because it is tradition and it makes their busy lives easier."

"But, you're the lower end of society right? People look down on you because you are a servant?"

"Absolutely not! Serving in the palace is a highly valued position, and our occupations are just as important and desired as the farmer who tills the field and the alchemist who heals the sick." She reached for him, and he pulled back. "Is that how it is on that world you come from? Do they have slavery and devalue your importance based on your position?"

"How else can it be?"

"Oh Maku. Of course, it can be different. Not all worlds are like yours. Even the world we came from originally had its issues, but here we have a good life here and are well valued. Here you could have everything you ever wanted. You could be free and happy."

Her words washed over him, but it was too much for him to believe. "Not everything."

"Oh? What do you think would be missing? You are a Prince. You would have your pick of maidens to court, and there is always plenty of food and good, fresh air and sunshine. You have people who love you and..."

"I wouldn't have Iason."

"Who is Iason?"

"My Mas..." Riki bit his lip on the word, knowing she would not understand. No one would ever understand what was between he and Iason. "I want Iason and they keep telling me I can't have him."

She frowned, trying to understand. "This is your mate?"

Riki nodded.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that. Love transcends gender. Would your Iason not wish to stay here with you?"

"He can't, your precious King won't let him."

"I'm not sure I understand. If this is someone you love, Sarrum would easily accept..."

"He's an android."

"I'm afraid I don't know what that means."

"It means the one he loves is a machine." A small, balding man nearly buried under colorful robes stepped through the chamber door. "The machine that has enslaved him and forces him to do unspeakable acts."

"A machine? How can you love...?"

"His brain isn't a machine!" Riki insisted, rising to his feet and fisting his hands. "He has feelings just like we do. He has needs, just like we do. You don't know what you're talking about so butt the fuck out!"

The young woman looked from one to the other, confused then touched Riki's arm and spoke gently to him. "Is this true that he has made you his slave?"

"I believe the term they use is pet. The machine forces Maku to perform sexual acts."

"Alistair!"

Yilea entered her face furious. "You speak out of place."

"I speak only the truth..."

She moved to him and stood toe to toe. "Maku's life before now is not for public consumption. You will hold your tongue or I will personally remove it!"

The man backed down immediately and Riki was shocked that a slave, or whatever she was, would dare speak that way. Granted he'd done so plenty of times in Tanagura, but he'd also paid for it. Wasn't she afraid of being punished?

"I apologize Maku," The bald man bowed slightly. "My name is Alistair, I am adviser to The King. He sent wishes you to come to him now."

"I'm not at his beck and call," Riki snapped.

Yiela again spoke to the guard. "Tell the King that Maku will attend him shortly."

"I said I..." His eyes snapped shut at hard look the beautiful leader of his Serago shot him. He watched the adviser leave and started his protest again.

"Perhaps the King has found your Iason?" she reminded firmly. "Would it not be better to refrain from angering him if you wish him to honor your request?"

"What do you know about it?"

"I know you depend on him to save your loved one," she stated quietly. "It is my duty to make your wishes come true, Maku. To do so, I must keep the peace between you and the King until your request is granted and you are made happy."

Riki blinked at her. She couldn't really mean that. "So...if I tell you I want something, you have to get it for me?"

"Of course."

"Even if the King tells you not to?"

Her gaze held his. "My King is the ruler of this land and is respected by all, however my job is to serve you and fulfill your desires, in whatever way I can. I would hope you would not put me in the position to go against Sarrum, as it could mean dismissal to not only myself, but the rest of the ladies as well. However, if it something you feel strongly about, then yes I will do as you request, but only if I am assured it will mean your happiness, and not if I believe that it will lead you to feel regret or sorrow."

Riki tried to ignore the guilt her speech installed in him. So, she would do what he asked. The idea that he had such power over her and the other women gave him an uncomfortable sense of power, but he knew he had to use whatever he could with Iason out of commission.

"You're right," he said, wiping his hands on the napkin the girl offered him as he rose to his feet. "You catch more bees with honey, right?"

Yilea's eyes narrowed on him. "You understand that saying?"

"Yeah sure, means I gotta be nice."

"It would be in your best interest," she agreed, though her eyes sparked with suspicion as she walked towards the door.

"Hey!"

They both turned as Guy rose.

"What about me?"

"Can he go for a walk in the garden or something?" Riki asked, wondering if Guy might be able to make contact with Shiao and find out about Iason; assuming his story was even true.

"Unfortunately your friend has been banned from the gardens," Yilea scolded and watched the tall, pale skinned Human chuckle in memory and shove his hands into his pants pockets.

"Oh." Riki tried to think of another ruse, but Guy spoke up first.

"How about the kitchens?" he suggested, hopefully. "I'm a bit of a decent cook. I wouldn't mind having a look at how to make some of these dishes."

Yilea considered it, glanced at Riki who simply shrugged.

"He can cook." Guy had always managed to put a decent meal together from the indecent scraps they had managed to scrounge up in Ceres. He could probably do really well with actual food.

Yilea nodded to the two guards standing just inside the door, and then to the young girl who had been talking to Riki. "Melisandre, take our young visitor to the kitchens." To the guards she added. "Watch him closely."

They nodded and Riki and Guy exchanged a knowing glance before the Mongrel followed Yilea out of the room.

"See, that makes me happy," he told her as they started down the hall. "I could get used to this."

"I'm sure you can," Yilea retorted, not the least fooled.

## Chapter 27

### Summary for the Chapter:

Riki and the King have a chat, Shiao reveals his plan to Guy

### Notes for the Chapter:

So...I found a portion of my originally lost story, which is somewhat different from the current direction it has taken, so after I finish this one up (which I hope will be shortly as you must be getting sooooo tired of reading :\*) I will also post the alternate ending. You can chose whether or not to read it at that time.

Anyway this is just a short chapter to keep you going. Sorry for the length of time between updates but I really, really appreciate all of your comments and support!

Guy walked between the two, much smaller guards and tried not to smirk. If they were not carrying those stinger weapons, which he knew from his first introduction to them, hurt like a son of a bitch, he would just step on them and be on his way. Instead he behaved himself as they led him through the corridors towards what he hoped was actually the kitchens and not an execution room.

All the locals here were average size, some were darker than Riki, others were lighter, but they were not as pale as Guy was and certainly not as pale as an Elite, so of course they stood out. Still, he stood head and shoulders over all of those he had met so far, except for the Queen, who was nearly as tall as he was and very statuesque, compared to the King, who was only a few inches taller than Riki.

Riki. He closed his eyes for a moment as he thought of the cries and sobs he had heard his former lover make while unconscious. He didn't understand what was happening with Riki and didn't feel he had the right to ask, at

least not until Riki had properly forgiven him. It was unfathomable to be raised as a mongrel, and then taken as a pet by a Blondie, then suddenly finding out you were a Prince from an entirely different race.

Riki had always had the reputation of being hard, cold and unforgiving, but Guy knew a different side than the one his friend had portrayed to others. He had seen the glimmer of sweetness and compassion, and he knew that Riki felt things deeply. Riki's strong pride only served to hide Riki's sensitivity. He felt things deeply and Guy loved that about him, but it was a side of himself that Riki hated. Unwilling to be seen as vulnerable, Riki hid behind anger or indifference, and rarely let anyone see the real person underneath.

Did Riki allow Mink to see that side of him? Was Mink even capable of understanding Riki's emotions, or what a gift it was that Riki allowed it?

"Watch your head," one of the guards said as they paused at a stairwell with a low stone archway.

Guy ducked and started down the steep, winding steps, then heard a strange sound behind him, and when he looked back, he saw that both guards were unconscious and a tall, looming figure was blocking the entrance.

"Shiao!" Guy practically leapt over the fallen guards to embrace the Elite.  
"You're okay."

"Of course. Did you believe otherwise?"

Guy stepped back and stared up into the now familiar green eyes, disappointed that they'd held none of the affection he had seen in them earlier when they had kissed. Maybe it was true, and it was just Mink's emotions that had temporarily affected Shiao, and Guy really didn't mean that much to him.

Suddenly embarrassed for his own impulsive reaction, he quickly dropped his arms and stepped back. "Yeah, sure."

"Come, we have little time." Shiao caught Guy's hand and pulled him down the stairs again. "Is your friend well?"



Guy followed obediently. “Not really, I think this place is really messing with his head.”

“I know the feeling,” Shiao muttered as he stopped halfway down and pushed against the wall, which suddenly slid open.

Having to join with Iason every hour or so to give the Blondie something to focus on in his current deprived state was creating further turmoil inside Shiao. When he had first seen Guy he’d felt a flash of arousal, then of protectiveness. Then Guy embraced him and he had wanted to return the gesture, but was too concerned that they might both wind up naked if he did.

He did not understand these new sensations and emotions, nor did he welcome them. They were rough and had a hard, manic edge to them that was similar to the ones he had managed to purge so many decades ago, yet there was a soft layer to these feelings as well. There was some other type of sensation that he could not yet identify, and he was unfortunately quickly becoming addicted to that one added nuance.

“How...how did...”

“I have spent these many hours learning the layout.” Shiao explained as they ducked through the opening and the wall closed up again, leaving them in total darkness. He felt Guy grab for his hand again and squeeze. “What is it?”

“I...not a fan of the dark,” Guy muttered, ashamed.

“Why? The dark cannot hurt you.”

Yes it could, Guy thought, if someone locked you in the back of an old delivery truck, raped and beat you for hours then left you to die. It had been Riki who had found him, who had taken care of him and Riki who had avenged him with the three boys that had assaulted him. It was shortly after that incident that Riki made Guy his pairing partner, clearly announcing it to everyone and letting them know that whoever fucked with Guy also fucked with Riki, and no one was willing to take on Riki the Dark.

It was a moment that changed Guy's life, one he thought of both as a curse and a blessing.. Guy had been hurt and traumatized, and grew afraid of the dark, he also gained the only thing he had ever remembered really wanting, Riki. And how had he repaid Riki? By kidnapping him, not once but twice, castrating him, almost getting him killed. Tears of shame sparked his eyes and he was glad that Shiao could not see him.

Shiao allowed his eyes to glow to give them a guiding light. "You are with me, I will let no harm come to you."

Guy followed quietly and they seemed to walk for a very long time, before they came to a heavy gated door, which lead to an outside culvert. He stepped through and glanced up at the stars that peppered the evening sky. Turning, he could just see one of the towers of the castle, the castle where Riki was going through so much fucking turmoil.

"I'm absolute shit."

Shiao's eyes returned to normal as he turned back to the mongrel. "I do not understand the reference."

Guy smirked and sighed. "Never mind." He remembered his promise to Riki. "Is Mink okay?"

"He appears to be stable at this time."

"Is he still unconscious?"

"He is."

"Okay, but you have him somewhere safe?"

"For now."

"Okay." Riki would be glad to hear that. "Good, that's good." Guy turned to go back through the hidden entrance and Shiao caught his arm.

"Where are you going?"

“Back in.”

“I just got you out!”

“Yeah, and I appreciate that, and the update, but I have to get back to Riki. He’s all alone in there...”

“Guy, I assaulted two guards, they will not be so ignorant to believe your story again. If you went back now you would be in danger.”

“I can’t leave Riki alone!”

“We will have him out soon, I promise you.”

“How? How are we gonna get him out, and when we do, how are we gonna get off this fucking planet?”

“I have enlisted an ali who has a ship. They do not suspect him of any wrong doing, to my knowledge he is believed to just be a trader here for the festival.”

“Oh...kay, but how are we gonna get Riki out?”

“Simple, I’m going to kill him.”

Guy stumbled as all colour drained from his face. “W...what?”

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Riki and Yielā had only walked a short distance with the Advisor appeared again and guided Riki the rest of the way. He had expected to be brought to the Throne Room, as before, but instead he was lead up two flights of stone steps to a single gold and blue door. Allistair knocked, then nodded to Riki

and walked off. After a moment's hesitation, Riki pulled the door open and stepped inside.

The room was filled with books! They lined the walls for two stories up, where a spiral staircase lead to a second landing. This room was bigger than the main library in Eos, it had to be! Of course most of the books there were on data ports to be read off of a pad. Riki preferred the feel of a real book, when he could get it, and all of these were absolutely real, because he could smell the leather bindings and parchment.

He couldn't help but be impressed and his lust for the books must have been evident because he heard someone chuckle from the other side of the room. He turned and stared at The King, who had shirked his formal attire and now wore a simple blue, short sleeve tunic with brown leggings and boots.

“This was always your favorite room in the castle,” Nathaniel said as he poured a generous serving of a dark liquid into two crystal goblets then picked them up and walked towards his son. He offered one of the cups, but the young Prince made no move to accept it. “Will you not even drink with me?”

“I have a thing about drinking something when I don't know what's in it.”

“I see.” Nathaniel shrugged took a sip from one of the cups, then offered that same one to Riki. “I assume you are sensible enough to know that I would not try to poison myself?”

Reluctantly, Riki accepted the goblet. He still needed to try and stay on the King's good side, if Guy's plan failed, whatever that was, he would still need the King to get Iason home. "Have you found him?"

"No, but we will." Nathaniel settled down on one of the comfortable looking couches, held his drink in one hand and stretched his free arm over the back of the couch. "Is it possible he simply woke up from this thing and escaped?"

Riki shook his head. Iason would never leave him behind, but the King refused to understand that. He couldn't reveal too much, lest he ruin whatever plan this Onyx that Guy trusted had going, but at the same time he had to sound somewhat concerned. And he was, but more so because he couldn't really trust Guy and he didn't know this other Elite either.

"Why am I here?" he suddenly asked as he set the goblet down, untouched and moved towards the first shelf of books.

"This is where you belong."

Riki browsed the titles, all bound in colored, soft leather. "Not really."

"How can you say that? This is your home, Ce...Riki."

"Maybe, if I really was the boy you lost, but I'm not."

“You are. You think I would not know my own son?”

“But you don't.” Riki moved to the next shelf and selected a book in blue binding. “You know nothing about the person I am now.” He opened the book, read the first few lines, then closed it and put it back on the shelf. “Even if I was your son, this hasn't been my home for years, so your assumption is based only on your own arrogance.”

Nathaniel's eyebrows rose, intrigued. “You think me arrogant?”

“Aren't you?” Riki found another book and again opened it to the first page. “Just because I'm a mongrel, doesn't mean I'm an idiot.”

“I never thought otherwise.”

“Yet, you kidnap me, drag me across the galaxy. Demand I stay and play the part of a lost Prince.” He turned the page and skimmed through the material. “Threaten Iason with dismemberment, force me to make a bargain with you to save his life, then you lose him altogether.” The book snapped shut and he turned to the King. “And you *arrogantly* assumed I would want any of this?”

Nathaniel sipped his drink for a moment then nodded. “Fair point well made. We have been pressuring you and for that, I apologize. I assumed

that you would be relieved to be away from that wretched place, that you would be grateful to have your freedom restored.”

“But I'm not free. Instead of being Iason's pet, I'm yours. You want me to trade one Master for another and you haven't once asked me how I feel about it.”

“I don't agree that the situations are at all similar. Here you are a Prince. You are respected and revered. You have access to whatever you desire and may go wherever you desire. You would in no way be defiled or...”

“Liar!”

Nathaniel rose, furious. “I have said before that I will not tolerate...”

“Everything I have asked for you've denied me. If what you say is true then why isn't Iason here? Why didn't you send him home when I first asked? Why are you forcing me to stay when I don't fucking want to *be* here?”

Nathaniel was shocked by Riki's outrage, which far surpassed his own, but also by the words which Riki spoke, for they had the cold ring of truth to them. Slowly he sat down again. “You must understand, son...”

“There you go again! Telling me I have to understand. Telling me I have to listen. Well, I don't and I won't! You are no better than the Elites. You

demand everyone fall into your way of thinking, do what you tell them to do. You're the same!"

Nathaniel was up and across the room so fast that Riki barely had time to blink, before both his arms were gripped by large, strong hands. "I am your *father*. I would never do the things that...that thing has done to you. I would never force you against your will!"

"You are! You're already..."

"No! We may have been firm in keeping you here, but be reasonable, Riki! You are our son, so of course we want you to stay with us, here where you do belong, whether you remember it or not. You don't realize the state of things because that thing has brainwashed you..."

"No!"

"Yes! As that is the case, the true case, we will continue to be firm in your remaining here where you will be safe and..."

"I'm safer with Iason than I am with anyone else!"

"That is not possible! The things he must have done to you! The pain you have endured..."



“Jason doesn’t hurt me!” Anymore, Riki added silently and tried to pull away from the King's grip. “Let go.”

Instead Nathaniel pulled Riki closer and enfolded him in his arms. Riki remained still as stone, yet his heart rate skipped and started to race. Why was this so damn familiar? Why did he feel the crawling sting of shame each time he raised his voice to this man? Perhaps the King was his father, perhaps he was a Prince, but something still felt...wrong. The King felt familiar, sounded and looked familiar, yet...he wasn't.

“I only want what is best for you,” Nathaniel murmured. “Would you not even consider staying here and getting to know your family? Is there no part of you that can accept that we are your parents and we love you?”

“What's the Harvest?” Riki felt the King tense, and then suddenly he was released.

“Why are you asking about that?”

“Is it true you take care of the dead?”

“That is one of my functions yes.”

“Why? You're a King. Why do you do that when you could delegate others to?”

“Because I am King!” Nathaniel snapped, then took a deep, visible breath, turned away and picked up his glass. He moved to the table to refill it. “One must remember their place in the world, Riki. I was poor once. I had to beg for food and wear clothes far too thin for the harsh winters we are cursed with, but I survived. I survived by the kindness of others and my own willpower to work towards a better future.”

“Do you want a medal?” Riki huffed, crossing his arms over his chest and dropping petulantly onto one of the couches.

He needed to be angry, to use his sarcasm because the man's words suddenly made him want to ask more questions. A need was growing inside of him, a need to know the full truth, and to believe the words that came from this man's mouth. Gods, he wanted to believe the King so badly and he didn't even understand why.

He wanted to know more. He wanted to know everything about the man standing before him; what he ate, how he worked, what books did he read, did he like music? He wanted answers to all of these questions but he couldn't make himself ask for them. There was no sane reason why he should care anything about the King and yet...he did.

Nathaniel settled on the opposite couch facing Riki. “I am trying to explain why this menial deed is so important. I had nothing once, then I found a

path and my skills began to grow. I made a good life for myself, first as a merchant, then a Captain of the Guard and then as King.”

When the King suddenly stopped talking, Riki was forced to meet his gaze. “And?”

“And I forgot.” Nathaniel sighed, heavily. “I forgot about the things that were important, truly important. I started to take people for granted, my situation for granted. I became powerful, very powerful and with that power came arrogance, yes, as you said, but also a feeling of omnipotence. There was nothing I couldn’t do. Nothing I couldn’t have, if I wanted it badly enough.”

“You sound like Iason,” Riki smirked and watched the King’s face darken.

“Perhaps. Perhaps at that time we may have enjoyed some similarities, but then, in the heartbeat of one afternoon everything was shattered. Within that one day, I became powerless, frightened and ashamed.” Nathaniel carefully rose, stepped over to Riki and crouched beside him. “In that one day I lost the person who was most dear to me, and in so doing, nearly wrecked my marriage, my kingdom and everything else besides.”

Riki stared at the King, feeling awkward to have anyone kneeling before him. “You’re saying because I was taken you had a life changing moment?”

“Yes.”

“Bullshit.”

“Riki...”

“Fucking bullshit!” Riki bolted up from the sofa, knocking the King backwards onto his ass. “If that were true why didn’t you look for me?”

“I...I explained that. I tried but...”

“You were injured? You were lost?” Riki sneered, alarmed at the rising mix of panic and fury that rose within him and yet he couldn’t stop the words tumbling out of his mouth. “You left me! Why the fuck did you do that? Why did you leave me alone and never come back? Why? WHY?”

Nathaniel quickly rose as Riki started to hyperventilate and two guards entered, having heard raised voices and grown concerned for their King. “It’s fine,” he waved them off, even as he shoved Riki back onto the sofa and put younger man’s head between his knees. “Just a panic attack we’re fine. Go on out now.”

The guards turned and left as Nathaniel rubbed Riki’s back. “Breathe, son. Deep breaths, in and out.”

“F...Fu...” Riki couldn’t even get the swear word out, he seriously could not catch his breath. His chest was on fire, his lungs were empty and he was seeing spots in front of his eyes.

“I can never make amends for leaving you, I know that. I did what I thought was best at the time, I tried to keep you out of danger, but they found you anyway and I am sorry. I never intended for any of this to happen and if I could go back and change things I would. I would give my very life if it would prevent you being taken from us and living on that wretched planet all these years.”

“You...you’re dead,” Riki wheezed out as the spots in front of his eyes started to form images from his dreams. “You’re dead.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I...I saw you. It...it killed you.” Riki lifted his eyes upwards and tears splashed down his cheeks. “It ate your insides. I watched from the tree. I saw it all!”

Nathaniel frowned as his hand stopped rubbing for a second. “Son, you... you must have had a nightmare.”

“It was! It was a nightmare, but it was about that day. I saw it! I saw you!” Riki pulled back suddenly frightened as he remembered crawling out of the tree, falling and landing on something softer than the ground. The ground had felt unusually wet and warm, but it hadn’t rained. He lifted his hands,

as he had in the dream and for a split second, they were covered in blood. “So much...red. There’s so much red. What is it? What is it!”

Nathaniel surged forward as Riki screamed and wrapped his arms around his son. “I’m here. It wasn’t real, son. I am right here with you. Your memories and your fear and confusion are mixing together and causing horrible, false dreams.”

“No. NO! Iason! Iason!” Riki squeezed his eyes closed as he started to sob uncontrollably. He couldn’t do this anymore, he couldn’t fight against the memories the feelings. He just wanted to go home, he wanted Iason, he wanted...

“Ciel.”

Riki’s eyes opened, responding unconsciously to the unfamiliar name, and found himself staring into his father’s dark eyes.

“It was a dream. I am alive. I am here and I am real. You are safe. You can stay with us and be safe.”

“Real,” Riki moaned as he felt himself fall further and further into those deep obsidian pools. His eyes....the man had his eyes. So clear, so dark... and they were his eyes. “Safe.”

“Your dream was false.”

“False.”

“You are my son. I am your father.”

“Fat..ther.”

“Yes.”

Riki’s turmoil and confusion fled and was replaced by a feeling of understanding and contentment. “You’re my father.”

“I am. You are my son.”

“Papa.” Riki leaned forward and slid his arms around the King’s shoulders.  
“Papa.”

Nathaniel breathed a sigh of relief and enfolded his son in his arms. “I’m here, son. I am here.”

A knock on the chamber door interrupted them and Nathaniel slowly pulled away and rose. “Enter.”

Allistair entered, bowed his head briefly. “Forgive the intrusion, Sarrum. It appears the Prince’s friend has escaped.”

Nathaniel sighed and looked down at the young man still seated and staring up at him. “Find him.”

“Yes, Sarrum. And when we do?”

“He is to meet the same fate as the android.”

Allistair nodded, bowed his head again and stepped outside.

Nathaniel smiled, gripped Riki by the shoulders and gently pulled him to his feet. “We need to get you changed, the festival will be starting soon, and you are not properly dressed.”

“Yes, Father,” Riki responded and allowed the King to lead him out.

“I have a wonderful surprise for you,” Nathaniel said as they entered the corridor. “I am sure you will be pleased. “



“Yes, Father.”

Nathaniel smiled as he lead Riki away.

Yiela stepped out of the shadows and scowled, then hurried off to report to the Queen.

## Chapter 28

### Summary for the Chapter:

Katze reports to Raoul, the Queen's suspicions are confirmed and Riki goes to the Harvest festival

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so very, very much for your wonderful comments, it is so very much appreciated it. Tension is mounting and I can see that you are all excited to see what happens next, so please read on and I'll try to update again soon. :-)

**\*\* The Burning Heart, by Lady Ise- Hyakunin Isshu Anthology**

Katze glanced up when the shed door opened. He sat next to Iason reciting a poem; Shiao had suggested he keep talking to the Elite, but outside of business, he and Iason had nothing to discuss. They weren't friends, and while he knew almost everything about Iason's life, both professionally and personally, he would never consider discussing those things. And so, he had fallen back on reciting some poetry from a book he had read awhile back. He couldn't even be sure he was repeating it correctly, but he doubted that Iason would be all that particular.

"You." His eyes widened in shock, then his expression hardened as Guy walked through the door. "Why is it always *you*?"

Guy raised his hands peacefully as Katze struggled to rise. "Look, I'm not..." He began, and then found himself flat on his ass a second later. "Come on!"

Katze had overbalanced himself when he had swung at the mongrel, and almost joined him on the floor, but Shiao stepped through the shed door and steadied him, settling him back in the chair. "I should have killed you at Dana Bahn!" He never should have listened to Riki.

“This isn’t my fault!” Guy practically whined as Shiao offered him a hand up.

“Do you not have *any* friends?” The Onyx teased as he pulled the mongrel to his feet.

“Just you, I guess.”

Shiao smirked and turned back to Katze. “I assure you that whatever involvement you may think Guy has had in this situation, it is not true. He came to be here only as result of my own actions, do please refrain from further argument.”

“You don’t get it! Have you any idea what he’s...”

“I know exactly what he has done,” Shiao interrupted Katze’s tirade. “I make no excuses for his behavior, however he has suffered as well and I believe his heart is true in his wish for redemption. As a Human, do you not have even a spark of forgiveness you might offer?”

“Every time I forgive him, Iason and Riki’s lives are put at risk again. How the hell can I trust him?”

“Because I do.” Shiao moved to stand over Iason. “How has he been? Has he moved, spoken?”

Katze shook his head. It was unnerving to watch Iason sleep, without even so much as a twitch or tremor. He understood that as an android, Elites could shut their bodies down in what simulated sleep, perhaps they were even able to dream, but seeing him like this appeared too much like death.

“It’s past the time of the joining now, why hasn’t he woken up?”

“We may not have reached his consciousness in time, or perhaps our efforts were too little.” A mind link with him was hardly the same as the all-encompassing joining of Jupiter’s mind, still he could only try.

“Are you saying he could die?”

“I cannot enumerate as to what may be happening inside his cerebral cortex, or the happenstance upon which a certain outcome is any more likely than another, therefore it would be folly for me to attempt to theorize a possible solution.”

“English, motherfucker,” Guy teased. “I know you speak it.”

Katze gaped at Guy. Was he out of his mind, speaking to an Elite like that, Onyx’s may be low on the totem pole, but they were still a Son of Jupiter. However, when he glanced at Shiao he saw the twinkle of humor in those jade green eyes.

“I simply do not know,” Shiao returned softly. “We can only hope for the best and get on with our work.”

“Work? What work?”

“To rescue Riki so we can all get the hell off this rock,” Guy retorted as he crossed his arms across his chest and leaned against the shed wall.

Katze glared at Guy, then turned to Shiao and demanded. “You have a plan?”

“Yes.”

“A good plan?”

“Define good.”

Katze spun around at Guy again. “You, shut up, or you’ll have matching bruise on the other side of your face.” He again turned his attention to Shiao. “Will it work?”

“If everything goes exactly as required without deviation.”

“So...no then.” Katze sighed, things rarely went exactly to plan. “Shit.”

“It has to work,” Guy insisted pushing off the wall and moving closer, then stepping back when Katze began to rise again. “Woah! Look, I get that

you're pissed at me, and I'll let you beat on me later, but right now we have to concentrate on getting Riki and Mink, as well as our own asses, on a ship out of here."

Katze's eyes narrowed. "As if you care about what happens to Iason! You've tried to kill him, twice!"

"The second time was not my fault! Orphe..."

"Orphe was deranged and you told him everything he needed to know to trap Iason so you could have Riki to yourself...ULP!" Katze squawked as Shiao suddenly picked him up and gently tossed him over his shoulder. "What the hell?"

"I need to get you to your ship," he explained. "It is best that we make contact with Jupiter as soon as possible and ascertain if we have leverage for a second means of escape."

"O...okay fine, but I can walk! Put me down!"

Guy tried not to enjoy watching the black-market dealer squirm and struggle in vain against the Onyx's back. "You'll just tire yourself out," he grinned. "Once he has hold of you, there ain't no escape."

"It will be faster for me to carry you," Shiao explained as he opened the door to the shed again. "Also, you should not be walking on that leg yet."

Taking the suicide cart back up the mountain, in which Katze kept his eyes closed while Shiao grinned like an idiot the entire way, they made it to the ship without any trouble. There were several species milling about both in the village below and here on the spaceport, so perhaps they did not seem out of place, although Katze did not enjoy the few 'touching' looks they received on the way. Did the people think he and Shiao were a couple?

Shiao finally set him down, once inside the ship, and he dropped into the pilot's chair and immediately entered a coded transmission. "It may take them time to answer," he told Shiao who remained standing behind him.

“We have time,” the Onyx assured as he looked around the cockpit of the small, sleek ship. “This is a fine little ship. Iason’s?”

“No. It belongs to an associate.”

“How long have you been flying?”

Katze was used to people being curious about his line of work, and had learned to easily deflect such questions, but it felt strange for someone to ask about his actual personal life. He had been an orphan that no one had wanted, then a Furniture who had no rights to be anything but as a servant of his master. Now he was a Black Market dealer and had connections and respect, but he was still Iason’s man.

“About five years.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

Katze blinked, when was the last time anyone asked him about how he felt? “I...Iason felt it was a necessary skill.”

“Yes, but do you enjoy it?” Shiao managed to squeeze into the co-pilot chair. “I do...enjoy flying. It gives one the feeling of being free, while still the thrill of being in complete control of something dangerous and powerful.”

Katze could not deny that he often felt that way and looked forward to the times he had been permitted to take out a ship, for one reason or another.

“How long have you worked for Iason?”

Katze appreciated the fact that Shiao did not phrase the question as most others did, but referring to Iason as his Master; which of course he was. “Almost twenty years.”

“That is a long time. You are fortunate to have a secure position, he must trust you.”

“Yeah.” Katze was trying to figure out Shiao’s angle. “How do you know Iason? He’s never mentioned you.”

“Does Iason tell you everything?” Shiao smiled.

“No. Of course not.”

Shiao nodded just as the console beeped, signaling an incoming message. “He is a private being.”

Katze stared at Shiao for a long moment in full agreement, then flipped a switch to open the channel to Amoï. Raoul’s face appeared on the screen.

“Katze, what news do you have for me?”

“We have Iason,” he advised. “He’s in the Deep Sleep.”

Raoul nodded sagely. “Jupiter feared he would submit to the darkness while out of her reach.”

“He has not submitted,” Shiao advised sitting forward. “We have managed to keep him...”

“What is *that* doing there?”

“This is Shiao, he’s the one who rescued...”

“That thing is an abomination and should be destroyed!”

Katze glanced up at Shiao who remained expressionless. “I...don’t understand.”

“He is referring to the fact that I am an original Onyx model, series # 0030. Jupiter deemed us failures, and so purged our model, through to the 0110’s in order to make way for the Onyx which now serve in Tanagura.”

Katze considered his words, and then wondered how long ago that was. He had only once seen a serial number on an Elite, and the number had been in the one hundred thousands. “Uh...when was that?”

“Seven centuries ago.”

Katze stared at Shiao dumfounded. “Then...how...how are you...?”

“He obviously escaped deactivation,” Raoul insisted. “Something I will soon remedy.”

“You are welcome to try,” Shiao returned calmly. “For now, would it not be best to concentrate on our mission here?”

“You have no mission you filthy reject! I order you to....”

“You misunderstand me. I am not one of your pets or a Furniture, I have no master.” Shiao rose, intimidating as his full height filled the cockpit, and placed a hand on Katze’s shoulder. “I will leave you to explain, Katze, and shall wait outside. Let me know when you are finished and I will carry you back.”

“Why would you need to carry him?” Raoul scowled, looking from the Onyx to the redhead.

“He is injured and walking is painful for him.”

Raoul’s eyes flashed red. “What have you done to him?”

“He has done nothing,” Katze stated quietly. “I was attacked by some animals and he assisted me and tended my wound. He has been nothing but helpful and he has been keeping Iason stable while he is in the Deep Sleep. You should be thanking him.”

“How dare you take that tone with me,” Raoul growled. “Have you lost your mind? Was it your head that was injured, because you have obviously taken all leave of your senses? It is obvious that you were the wrong choice for this mission.”

Katze could not deny the charge. He had been useless here, unable to reach Iason on his own, being attacked by beasts and injured, and left only to recite poetry to his Master. Raoul was correct, he should not be here.



“Are all Blondies as arrogant and disillusioned as you?”

Both Katze and Raoul gaped at Shiao in shock. No one...no one had every dared to speak to an Elite that way, not even another Elite.

“You dare...” Raoul began.

“If not for this young man, Iason would have already been lost and we would have no passage off this planet, yet you show your gratitude by doubting not only his abilities but also his sincerity. It seems to me that the one that should not have been chosen is you.” Before Raoul could manage a response, Shiao nodded to Katze. “I will be outside.”

Katze watched the Onyx leave with a new found respect, and a small smile, then quickly schooled his features as he turned back to Raoul. “What do you want me to do?”

Raoul took a moment to compose himself. “As it seems I have no choice but to leave you there and follow through, tell me of your plan.”

Katze complied and when he was done, Raoul nodded. “It is not without risks, but I suppose it will have to do.”

“It seems to be our best option.”

“And Iason is still well?”

“He hasn’t woken up yet, so I can’t say.”

Raoul nodded, paused, then said. “And your injury. How bad is it?”

“I’ll live.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“I know you don’t like the Onyx, but we’d be in bad shape without him, and he did say Jupiter sent him. Maybe you should check?”

“I will do so, immediately after we are done.”

Katze lowered his eyes. "I...apologize for not being better prepared. This place seems like a backwater but it has surprisingly good security and..."

Raoul raised his hand. "Stop. I should not have said what I did. I was angry and I will be the one to apologize."

Katze's eyes widened and he heard Raoul chuckle.

"Well now, I suppose my concession is worth it to finally see a decent expression out of you."

Katze's face returned to its normal blank expression, which only made Raoul smile.

"And you're back. Really Katze, does Iason like you being such a dullard?"

"I've had no complaints."

"If you were my man I would ensure that you made far more interesting expressions."

"I am not your man." And never will be, Katze finished silently.

"I will inform Jupiter of your plan, and will prepare a contingency rescue of it fails. I hope it works, for Jupiter is willing to risk open war if it does not."

"You can't be serious!"

"I am very serious. You need to bring Iason and the boy back quickly, Jupiter is not a patient being."

Katze nodded. "Understood."

"Are you sure you do not require my presence?"

"There are too many of us here now, anymore and it will be that much more difficult to get away undetected."

“Yes, you are right of course, but...do take care of yourself?” Raoul, as if sensing how personal his last words said, added. “If you die, Iason will be quite annoyed with me.”

“Of course. Signing off.” Katze ended the connection before Raoul could reply. “Prick.”

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Riki turned from where the two young women were fastening a long flowing cloak around his shoulders, as the door of his chamber opened and the Queen stepped in.

“Riki!” The fabric of her long flowing dress and cloak in the blue, purple and green shades of a turbulent sea.

He turned to her and his blue and black cape fluttered about him. The women had changed him into a pair of black legging and boots, a soft blue flowing shirt that tied in the front with gold lacing and etching around his wrists. The boots, polished to a miraculous shine, stopped just below his knee and were made of strong leather.

“Hello.”

The Queen stepped closer, then caught his face between her hands and stared into his dark eyes. The fact that he did not pull away was suspicion enough, but his eyes held the proof. There was not one trace of animosity or fear. No spark of rebellion, anger or mistrust.

“What has he done to you?”

“Who?”

Celestia glanced at the women and the guards who had entered behind us and snapped. “Leave us.” They obeyed immediately and soon she and her son were alone. “What did the King do to you, Riki?”

“My name is Ciel.”

Celestia’s gaze pierced his. “Do you remember?”

“Remember?”

“Who you are?”

“I’m your son.”

The Queen’s joy was mixed with unease. While she wanted him to remember her, she wanted to have her boy be truly hers again, this didn’t feel right. “Riki...”

“Ciel. My name is Ciel.”

No, this definitely was not right. She caught his face again. “Your name was Ciel, that is true, but now your name is Riki.”

He stared at her blankly, then he stepped back. “Do I look okay?” He turned around so she could see the full effect of his wardrobe.” It’s for the festival. Should I change?”

“No. You look very handsome.”

He smiled suddenly and her heart flipped over in her chest, for in that moment she saw the beautiful, playful little boy that she remembered.

“Ciel!”

Nathaniel appeared in the doorway and smiled. “Now, you look a Prince.” He stepped into the room and slid his arm around his Queen. “Does he not look wonderful, my love?”

“Yes, he does.” She noticed Yielia lingering just inside the door. “My dear, would you take the Prince to the Pavilion? We shall follow shortly.”

“Of course.” Yielia smiled at Riki as he moved forward without hesitation. “This way, Maku.”

“Okay,” Riki replied and followed her out.

“What did you do?” The Queen demanded of the King the moment the door closed.

“What do you mean?”

“What dark magic did you use...” She began and winced as he gripped her wrist.

“You are the only one of us with magic, my dear, dark or otherwise.”

Celestia met his gaze, unflinching. “Yes, and as I have done nothing to him, then you must have somehow...”

“It was taking too long!” Nathaniel snapped and quickly released her. He took a long, deep breath. “If you had only used a comprehension charm as I requested...”

“I will not use magic on our son!” she refused. “You should have waited!”

“I cannot!”

“Why? Why are you in such a rush? Why can you not be patient and...?”

“The android is dangerous and still has not been found, now the other one is missing. Systems have been failing all over the complex so it is evident that he has a third person working against us. The longer we wait the better chance there is that they will take him from us. Is that what you want? To lose our son a second time?”

“Of course not!”

“Then leave it. What I did I did for all of us.” He took both her hands in his. “Now, even if they try to take him he will not go. He can stay with us. We have our son back, is that not what you wished most?”

She shook her head and bit her lip as she lowered her eyes. It was what she wanted, what she had prayed for from the moment she learned their son

could be alive, but this seemed wrong. Taking away his will, forcing him to accept them with no connection of feeling felt wrong. It was no better than trapping her to fight in the games when she was young, because it was what others wanted. No better than the android making her son a pet.

Still, she decided to keep this to herself and accept her husband's embrace. "As you say," she replied quietly."

"Good. Now, let us go and join our son at the festival."

The Pavilion was a massive amphitheatre surrounded by huge marble columns and stunning sculptures at the entrance that reached almost to the sky. What lay beyond was a splendid assault of sights and sounds that seemed to bounce off of the high concrete walls and echo from all around them. Rows and rows of gleaming white benches fanned out from a glorious center stage, that rose from a grassy plain to form three connected, symbolic circles. A narrow, straight path led from the edge the outer circle to a high platform stage, where a selection of high-back wooden chairs sat, edged in gold and green leaf.

Color was everywhere, bright, green ivy climbed along the high concrete walls that bordered the main stage area and proposed a barrier against the stadium seating which was littered with orange and gold ribbons, russet browns, reds and green leaves and each seat held the a deep brown etching of a fall tree.

Several minstrels strolled along the crowd or upon the stage playing stringed instruments and long flutes and a flurry of other things that gave a charming, cheerful atmosphere to everything around them. There were a few people dressed in costume as well, playing around especially for the kids, a giant pumpkin, a tall corn stalk and even a man on stilts wandering over everyone.

By the entrance dozens of different food carts lined up to offer an assortment of fresh roasted meats, sliced fruits, steaming vegetables and mouth-watering breads to the locals who had already started to fill the stadium seats. Everyone was dressed in colorful robes or wraps, some wore tights and tunics or a long collection of brightly woven scarves.

A few people looked their way, smiled and nodded, then turned back to what they were doing.

“They do not yet know who you are, Maku,” Yielā whispered. “The King will make the announcement today, once the festival begins, so let us enjoy this free time among your people.”

Riki nodded as the scent of something familiar caught his nose and his stomach grumbled loudly. He put his hand over it, instinctually, as if to block the noise.

“Here y’are, sir.”

He looked down at a little girl with luscious blond hair that seemed strange against her dark skin, and teal green eyes. “Sorry?”

She grinned and held up a skewer of meat vegetables. “Your tummy says feed me, so ya gotta eat.”

He slowly accepted the offering. “I...don’t have any money,” he began and she looked at him confused.

“Whatcha need money for? Food is food. Ya don’t pay for food.” The girl turned to Yielā and offered her a skewer as well. “Here y’are pretty miss.”

Yielā smiled and accepted it. “Thank you child.”

“Is’ a’right. Come back for more if you want!” She hurried back to one of the carts and an older man, who was obviously her father, handed her four more skewers.

“G’wan then, feed the population ya little sprout!”

She giggled and ran off to pass her treats to someone else.

Riki stared at the skewer in his hand, and noticed Yielā was waiting for him to take a bite before she enjoyed hers. He did so, and the meat melted in his mouth. “It’s good.”

“It is my favorite,” she confessed as she daintily bit into hers. “Is there anything else you would like to try?”

“No.” Riki finished his off and looked for somewhere to put the empty stick, but Yielā just took it from him.

“Are you well, Maku?”

He looked at her. “Yes.”

She noticed that he had not yet once corrected her for using his title. “Are you sure? The King insists that you be here, however if you are not feeling well we can...”

“Is that where we sit?” he asked pointing to the platform far across from them.

“That is where the royal family sits, yes.”

“I should wait there then.”

“Wait, Maku?”

“Father will be here soon. I should wait there.”

Yielā finished off her skewer then handed them to a young boy who was wondering around with a basket collecting the used food utensils. “Did you have a good talk with the King?” she asked as they wandered through the throng towards the platform.

“Yes.”

“What did you talk about?”

Riki paused, looked at her, then continued walking. “I am his son.”

“You are yes. Is that what you talked about?”

“I don’t remember.”



“This way, Maku,” she said gently as she caught his arm and led him through an opening just below the platform that led to set of steps leading upward where two guards stood. “I am taking the Prince to his chair.”

They nodded respectfully and stepped aside.

“Do you remember what I told you before, Maku?” she asked as they climbed the wide, enclosed staircase side by side.

“About what?”

“That I serve you, and will do whatever is necessary to see you are happy.”

“Oh. Yes. I remember.”

“Are you happy, Maku?”

“Of course.”

She paused at the door, where a third guard was posted. “Why are you happy?”

“Because I’m home.” He stepped through the door into a curtained area and she caught his arm before he could push through to the other side.

“We should wait here, until the King and Queen arrives, so you may present yourselves together.”

Riki sat on the cushioned bench by the wall. “Okay.”

She settled beside him. “You seem different than before. May I ask why?”

He was silent and sat, staring straight ahead.

“Do you not miss your friend, Maku? Or the android? Are you no longer worried about them?”

“Father says there will be dancing girls,” Riki replied. “What kind of dancing will they do?”

Yiela smothered her scowl. "They all have their own style. Some do a routine as a group, some individual. There will also be other entertainment."

"Like what?"

"Well, usually there is a play to start off the shows, then perhaps a mage, or a clown. Every year is different, everyone shows different types of talent." She paused. "What sorts of talents do you possess, Maku?"

He looked at her, as if confused by the question.

"Everyone has something they do well," she insisted. "Surely there are a few that you have as well?"

"I'm stubborn," he decided after a long moment, then leaned in closer and stared right into her eyes. "Is that a skill?"

She swallowed, surprised at his sudden closeness. "I... imagine it could be, al...although most would say it was a fault."

"A fault?"

"Y...yes." Why was he leaning so close to her? She tried to sit back a little, to put some distance between them. "Maku, this is inappropriate. Perhaps..."

"Do you want to make me happy?" he whispered, his lips now barely a breath away from her own.

Yiela was not impervious to the charms of a handsome young man, and Riki was probably one of the most beautiful people she had ever met, but he was her Prince and she was growing even more concerned at what the King might have done to create such a change in him.

"Yiela?"

Hearing her name from his lips sent an exotic tingle up her spine. "M... Maku?"

“Do you want to make me happy?”

“Yes,” she answered truthfully and her eyes widened when he smiled.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

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Iason's eyes snapped opened and he immediately sat up. His first thought was for Riki, and then, just as suddenly his eyes spotted a familiar face and he was off the table and across the room, holding a mongrel up against the wall by the throat.

“Guurk!” Guy gasped as he clawed at Iason's hands. “S...sto...stop!”

“You! This was all your doing, wasn't it? Why do you continue to interfere?”

“N...Not...help!” Guy’s feet dangled, he tried to kick out do something, but he had no leverage. He then tried to swing at Iason with his mechanical hand, but the Blondie caught it and pinned it against the wall. “P...Please.” Guy's bravado fled. He didn't want to die. He had just gotten Riki to trust him again, and he had a good life, a life with Shiao!

“Where is Riki!” Iason demanded as he slowly squeezed the life out of the struggling man in his grip. “What have you done to him this time?”

“Iason!”

Iason glanced over his shoulder, but did not release his hold on the mongrel, as he glared at the two by the doorway of the shed. “You are part of his too?” he hissed the Onyx set Katze down strode into the shed. “Fine. I'll destroy both of you.”

“Let him go, Iason. Guy has been trying to help you!”

“I don't need his help. I need him dead.” Iason's hand squeezed tighter even as he held Shiao's gaze, and he watched the Onyx's eyes flash red. “Take him from me, then, if you dare.”

Guy knew he was dead, for Shiao wouldn't go against Iason, not when he had tried so hard to save him. He could feel the life draining from his body, and his struggling stopped as his eyes closed.

Shiao watched Guy go limp as he hung against the wall beneath the Blondie's grip and a sudden, furious rage filled him. He was moving before he realized his intent and suddenly he and Iason were crashing through the wall of the shed to the evening air outside.

Iason was on his feet in an instant, but then so was Shiao, and both had red eyes of rage. "How dare you!"

Iason's fury was cut off as Shiao flew at him, grabbing him around the waist, intending to slam the Blondie into the ground, but Iason was well equipped for battle, and he physically spun himself around so that his back was to Shiao, increased his weight until his feet hit the ground then he tossed Shiao over his shoulder. The Onyx's back hit a nearby tree and there was an almighty cracking noise, then the tree toppled to the other side. Iason had strode over, intending to kick him in the face, but Shiao caught the Blondie's foot and used it as leverage to pull Iason off balance.

Both were on their feet an instant later and trading harsh, solid blows that echoed in the forest around them.

Katze stumbled out of the shed and watched horrified yet fascinated as the two Elite's fought. This was no mere street fight, each of those blows could easily kill a Human, yet as fast as they came they were blocked. Far from Jupiter's grasp neither had any worry of repercussions as they fought to kill the other. He noticed that a couple of people had started to stray towards them.

"Stop them!" Guy gasped, nearly falling out of the shed as he held his aching and bruised throat. "They'll...kill each other!"

"How?" Katze demanded, even a glancing blow would kill him. Two more people had noticed the scene and one of them had hurried back the way they had come.

“They'll...call the guards!” Guy rasped, his throat so hoarse from Iason's attack he could barely speak. “D...do you want him to get...captured again?”

“No, but...” What could he do, Katze wondered. What could either of them do against the Elites?

Guy stumbled towards the pair, and suddenly hopped onto Shiao's back. “Stop it! Shiao stop!”

“Shit.” Katze limped over and put himself between Iason and the Onyx as soon as there was enough space. “Iason. Please calm down. You're attracting attention.”

Iason paused long enough to notice the crowd gathering, and it was enough for Shiao to land a solid right cross, even with a squirming mongrel on his back.

“Oi!” Katze grabbed the only thing available, a rock slightly larger than his palm, and threw it at the Onyx. “Back off!”

“Shiao! Shiao!” Guy couldn't maintain his hold on the enraged Onyx, and dropped to the ground, hard. “Ow! S...shit.” He lifted his hand weakly as his friend finally turned towards him. “You have...to stop. Please.”

Shiao's eyes slowly returned to green as he quickly crouched beside the fallen mongrel and touched a trembling hand to Guy's face. “You...are not dead?”

“What? No.” He hurt like hell and his head was swimming but he was alive. “I'm fine, see.” He grabbed Shiao's hand and put it to his chest so the Elite could feel his rapidly beating heart. “I'm okay.”

“He hurt you...” Shiao looked over as Katze helped Iason to his feet, and as if suddenly realizing what had happened he looked at his hands, and then back at Iason. “I...I attacked him.”

“It's okay. It's fine, but...we gotta go.”

“Yes.” Shiao nodded as he returned fully to his senses. How had he let that happen? How had he allowed his emotions to run free like that? He glanced at Iason, then carefully lifted Guy into his arms. “Come, I know a place that should be safe.”

“I will go nowhere with that interfering pest!” Iason refused, and as Shiao turned to him he had a flash of the Onyx screaming in agony and despair, for the death of his kind. “You...” he stumbled back and tried to ascertain where that had come from. He could remember pieces while he had been in the Deep Sleep, but they were jumbled with confusion and fear. “What have you done to me?”

“I kept you sane,” Shiao returned quietly. “You may repay my kindness by never touching Guy again.”

Iason was not used to being told what to do. “You dare ask me this?”

“I am not asking.” Shiao moved a step closer and his eyes flashed red for a split second. “Do not be fooled by our earlier fight, Iason. Had I truly lost all control I would have killed you.”

“You could not have...”

“Let me be clear. I have no safeguards. No programming that has not been overridden long ago. Killing an Elite is nothing to me, but killing you would be...difficult, not because you are stronger than me, but because we are connected, more now than ever before.”

“You linked with me?”

“I did, and it saved you.”

“I did not ask you to do this! I owe you nothing!”

“No, you owe him.” Shiao glanced down at Guy, who had finally passed out. “And you owe your pet, who has sacrificed a great deal to keep you from harm. If you have any pride, any real feeling for him, I suggest you shut up and do as I say from here on.”

“Where is Riki?” Iason demanded, as Shiao turned away and broke into a run.

“Later!” Katze snapped beside Iason, then immediately lowered his head. “I...I apologize.” He had been shocked by the battle between Iason and the Onyx, and then worried and frustrated when the crowd had started to gather. Now he was just in pain because of his leg and tried to keep up as Iason started to run. Not watching where he was going, he tripped over a rock and he fell hard onto the ground. “Fuck!”

Iason, hearing his cry, turned and immediately ran back.

“Don't worry about me!” Katze hissed, waving Iason off.

“Did you think I would leave you behind?” Iason growled as he tossed Katze over his shoulder. “You, whom I trust the most?”

Katze was unsure if it was his injuries, the stress of not knowing if Iason would wake up, or the feeling of failure he had from the very start of this mission, but his eyes teared up and his vision blurred. “I’ve failed you,” he muttered, even as Iason started to run and he was bounced lightly against the Blondie’s shoulder.

“I do not accept failure, least of all from you,” Iason stated as they entered a grove of tall trees.

“I know, but I...”

“You will give me a full report later, and successes and failures will be evaluated, until then, close your eyes and rest.”

“Iason...” Katze began again, even though the exhaustion had already started to set in, despite his current position and movement.

“Hanging from the branches of a green Willow tree, the spring rain is a thread of pearls.”

Katze blinked, recognizing one of the poems he had recited to Iason.

“Even for a time, short as a piece of the reeds, in Naniwa's Marsh, we must never meet again:

Is this what you are asking me?”

“You...heard me?” Katze murmured, even as he felt the darkness take him.

“I heard you,” Iason responded quietly, and could feel the total dead weight of the red-head as proof he had passed out. “Thank you, my friend.”



## Chapter 29

### Summary for the Chapter:

Not Tellin'! You'll just have to read it through :-)

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the long wait everyone, besides work I have been taking care of my twin nephews while my sister recovers from surgery and they are a handful! Nice long chapter to make up for it...almost the finale! As always, if you enjoy the story, please leave a comment.

The King clapped enthusiastically after a pair of magicians finished their act and smiled at his son, who watched the event without expression. He had made the announcement of the Prince's return to his people and there was a marvelous and touching cry of joy and applause, but now that people had settled into the festival, he noticed Ciel watched the shows without much enthusiasm.

“Are you not enjoying the show, son?”

Riki looked at the King. “Yes, of course.”

“You do not seem to be. Is there something else you would prefer to see? I am sure we can...”

“I don't understand it,” he admitted.

“Ah,” Nathaniel patted Riki's arm. “It is illusion and slight of hand.” He glanced at Celestia who had smiled politely through the show, but little else. He leaned in and whispered loudly to Riki. “The Queen is angry with me.”

“Angry?”

“Because you are not enjoying yourself.”

“I’m sorry.” Riki leaned forward so he could see the Queen, seated on the other side of the King. “I’m sorry.”

Celestia looked at him and her expression softened for a moment then hardened as she met her husband’s amused gaze. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Riki.”

“His name is Ciel,” Nathaniel muttered and received a glare from the Queen.

Riki sat back and met Yiel’s gaze, from where she stood off to the side, with other attendants. She flushed and lowered her gaze, then he turned his attention back to the show just as a trio of beautiful woman stepped onto the stage. The musicians began to play music and the trio danced in synchronicity, smooth, graceful and alluring, each of their moves were used to draw the audience in and thrill them with erotic style and beauty.

“Dancing girls?”

“Yes!” Nathaniel chuckled. “These are the dancing girls, and as I explained you may choose any you like.”

“Husband!” Celestia gasped, then quickly recovered when the servants and guards around them glanced her way in interest. She quickly lowered her voice. “What is the meaning of that statement, pray tell?”

“I told our son that he could pick any of the dancing girls to take back to his chamber, it’s time he was in a proper relationship.”

“With a dancing girl!” she hissed.

“Well, perhaps relationship is too strong a word.” Nathaniel winked at his son. “Eh, boy?”

“One of them?” Riki asked and pointed at the trio.

“Do you not find them alluring?”

“Nathaniel! I insist you...”

The King held up his hand and the Queen fell silent, mutinously, then he turned his attention to the Prince again. "If you don't like these, there are more to come."

Riki remained silent as the women gyrated around the stage. Finally they were done and the lights lowered on the stage, leaving just the torches burning in the seating area and around the Royal Box. Dusk had fallen and the evening sky above them twinkled with starlight.

A single light appeared on the stage, and within it a beautiful, tawny creature draped in green and black shimmering material. The costume crossed over one shoulder and down around her breasts, then crisscrossed over her waist and merged into a long, slatted skirt. Behind her a man stood at a keyboarded instrument, and with the first gentle stirrings of music, the dancer began to sing.

This is the end  
Hold your breath and count to ten  
Feel the earth move and then  
Hear my heart burst again

For this is the end  
I've drowned and dreamt this moment  
So overdue I owe them  
Swept away, I'm stolen

Let the sky fall  
When it crumbles  
We will stand tall  
Face it all together

Let the sky fall  
When it crumbles  
We will stand tall  
Face it all together

At skyfall  
That skyfall

“Breathtaking is she not?” Nathaniel asked in a hushed voice, noticing that his son had not taken his eyes off the exotic woman who moved with such fluid grace that it seemed to enchant all in attendance to absolute silence.

“She....She is...” Riki began.

Nathaniel smiled knowingly. “I thought she would be the one for you, but there are two other acts, so you should see them before...”

“Her.”

Nathaniel’s eyebrows rose, amused. “As you like.” He waved to his Right Hand. “Have this girl taken to the Prince’s chamber after the show.”

“As you wish, Sarrum.”

“Are our performers to be sold like cattle, now?” The Queen demanded quietly.

“Nonsense, no one will force her, and what pretty young woman would pass up the chance to be with a handsome Prince?”

Skyfall is where we start  
A thousand miles and poles apart  
Where worlds collide and days are dark  
You may have my number, you can take my name  
But you'll never have my heart

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together  
At skyfall

The Queen watched her son discretely, betraying none of the trepidation and worry she was feeling. The difference in the way he had been since he first arrived and how he was now was so extreme. She understood that Nathaniel had grown impatient and had been trying to do what was best for their son, but she could not resolve the fact that this was just another form of control. Her son had been controlled first by the android and now by his own father. It didn't seem right.

She wanted Riki to stay with them, she wanted her son back, but not this way. This way seemed dishonest and cruel. How would they know if their son ever truly remembered them, if Nathaniel was filling his head with thoughts of what he should remember? She wanted to believe that it was for the best. Nathaniel had been right that Riki would probably never break free of the control Iason Mink had over him, and so this was the only way. It wouldn't be permanent, she told herself. She would force Nathaniel to break the hold on Riki eventually and allow him to come to his own conclusions, but if she did that he would hate them even more, wouldn't he?

Nathaniel had not been himself since that horrible time so long ago, when they had lost their son. She had believed at first that it had just been trauma and grief, and perhaps that was exactly what it had been, however there were changes in him that she could not seem to fully accept. He was no longer the man she married, and yet it was her duty to stay by his side. His decision to do this to their son was yet another strange occurrence, for he had previously frowned on any use of coercion or magical force, even against an enemy.

And her darling boy had already been through so much, had suffered so horribly and been, from what she understood, abused and humiliated by a mechanical monster who looked like the devil and an angel combined. Yet

Riki wished to be with that thing, that Blondie that had enslaved him, and if she was honest, she could see from the short time she had been around Iason Mink that he did care for, or was at the very least, extremely protective of her son. Whether that was his need to dominate or some sort of actual feeling, she could not know. She hoped that they found the android soon, perhaps it would bring Riki back to his senses.

Skyfall is where we start  
A thousand miles and poles apart  
Where worlds collide and days are dark  
You may have my number, you can take my name  
But you'll never have my heart

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together  
At skyfall

Carrie watched Riki as she continued to dance, his eyes never left her, but there was something wrong with them. There was no recognition of their conspiracy, as she had expected to see. Perhaps he was acting like he did not know her, which would make sense, but it still unnerved her.

She could see that the King had given an order and smiled at Riki, no doubt she had been chosen as planned, but Riki still didn't look like himself. What had they done to him? She'd just seen him a couple of hours before, what could they have done to give him that look in his eye? They didn't need any added complications.

It would be a miracle as it was if she managed to get them out of the castle in one piece and without being found out, but Riki had to be himself for her to do that. Had they drugged him? Slipped him some sort of hypnotic? Oh, God, had they wiped his mind? What would she do if he didn't really know her? And why in the hell wasn't Iason with him? How could that bastard leave Riki alone with these people? Next time she saw Iason Mink she was going to shred his circuits, one wire at a time.

(Let the sky fall  
When it crumbles  
We will stand tall)

Where you go I go  
What you see I see  
I know I'd never be me  
Without the security  
Of your loving arms  
Keeping me from harm  
Put your hand in my hand  
And we'll stand

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together

Let the sky fall (let the sky fall)  
When it crumbles (when it crumbles)  
We will stand tall (we will stand tall)  
Face it all together  
At skyfall

Let the sky fall  
We will stand tall

At skyfall  
Oooohhhhh oooooohhhh

Carrie ended the dance by sliding her legs outwards into a devastatingly slow split, then she lay her back against the stage and her arms and back arched upwards.

The crowd rose to their feet and a thunder of applause surrounded her; which she had not expected and she felt herself flush from both exertion and a rush of pleasure. She rose from her position just as gracefully and bowed to the royal family. The King and Queen were applauding but the Prince was not; he just continued to stare at her with dark, unblinking eyes.

“Well done, my dear, well done.”

Carrie smiled and again bowed, then started to move off the stage, only to have a hand grasp hers and a collective gasp rise from the audience. Carrie lifted her eyes to meet the Prince’s, who had leapt from his seat onto the stage and captured her wrist. Again his eyes bore into hers.

“Ri...Ciel!” The Queen admonished even as her husband chuckled.

“Stay,” Riki asked quietly and with a gentle tug, pulled her towards the platform.

Carrie followed him back to his chair, was this part of his plan to take her back to his chambers? If so, it was a good one. She started to lower herself to the floor, but Riki sat down and pulled her onto his lap.

“Now just a moment!” The Queen began, but then she watched the woman practically curl into her son’s arms, as they folded easily around the woman.  
“Oh, well...”

“You see, what woman would refuse?” Nathaniel teased his wife as the next act began. He watched, with only mild interest as a fool took the stage and



performed amusing stunts, but his real attention was with his son and the pretty girl who was whispering and smiling to him.

After a few minutes, Riki asked if he might go back to his rooms and Nathaniel nodded. He ordered two guards to accompany them, and again soothed the Queen at the inappropriate act.

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As the Prince rose and left with the pretty creature that had been dancing earlier, a cloaked figure rose from his seat in the audience and started down towards the gates. He passed the vendors that still offered steaming hot foods, past several guards at the gate, then stepped outside. This was a new development, and one they may be able to use.

“Hungry sir?”

The figure glanced down at the child offering up a local delicacy, pulled away his hood and revealed long black hair and even darker eyes. A slightly pointed goatee gave his smooth, dark face a slightly roguish quality.

“I believe I will, thank you child.”

She giggled as he accepted the food, and then hurried off again. He watched her for a moment, met the eyes of local merchant who nodded politely to him, then he continued on. No one stopped him, or spared him a glance, for he looked very much like every other man in the village. Suddenly he turned and stepped into an alley behind one of the buildings, where a taller man stood.

“I believe he is headed back to the castle,” the man said and Shiao nodded. “I do not understand why we did not try for him there.”

“Because, there are too many witnesses, and if the Prince were to drop over dead in a crowd that large there would be cries of murder and collusion; no one would be permitted to leave until the perpetrator was apprehended.”

“I do not believe this plan will work, at any rate,” Iason said as he turned back into himself, his body becoming much taller and his appearance paler. “This poison you intend to give Riki, will it cause him pain?”

“I do not know what the symptoms will be. I can only say that it will give the appearance of death.”

“What if it actually kills him?” Guy asked in a hushed tone, and took an uneasy step behind Shiao as icy blue eyes narrowed on him. “I mean, it won’t, will it?”

“No, it will only slow his heart to an imperceptible rhythm, and it will wear off in less than a half an hour.”

“How did you even find something like that here, anyway?”

“Frogs.”

“I beg your pardon?” Iason growled.

“Frogs, well, toads specifically, they roam freely here and I noticed that a specific kind make their home on the creek bed behind the shed we were in. Their secretions emit a toxin...”

“I understand the chemical you are referring to, just as I understand the full dangers of using it.”

“If used in the right amount it will...”

“No.” Iason refused, firmly. “I will not put Riki in danger with such an act.”

“This is the only plan we have!” Guy insisted. “Or do you want to leave Riki with them for...”

He snapped his mouth shut and backed up several steps when Iason took a single step towards him. He had learned to be afraid of Mink, but had always been able to use his bravado against the beast at least. Now though, he ran the risk of getting Shiao involved if he pissed off Mink, possibly enough to attack him again. After watching the brief battle of the Elites, it

seemed the Onyx could hold his own against a Blondie, but he didn't want Shiao to get hurt if he couldn't beat Mink."

"Can you make yourself look like anyone?" Shiao suddenly asked.

"Yes, to a degree. I cannot imitate a female or someone too much smaller or taller than my natural height, only a few inches either way."

"The King is too short for you to imitate then?"

"I had considered that, but yes, he is near to Riki's height which is too slight for my parameters."

"It is an enviable skill," Shiao admitted, for he would dearly wish he could be many inches shorter than his own height. "But you are correct, there is no one in the Royal family you could imitate to get close to Riki."

"What about of the guards?" Guy suggested. "Some of them are almost as tall as me, maybe if he's moving people wouldn't really notice the height?"

"For that we would need a guard's uniform."

Guy grinned. "Leave it to me!" He discretely peeked around the corner, saw that the coast was clear and bolted off.

"Will you really let him go off on his own?" Iason asked Shiao, curious.

"He has a knack for such things."

"Assault and thievery you mean?"

"What other skills should he have gained living in Ceres?" Shiao countered calmly. "Can you claim better attributes for your pet?"

Iason almost smiled as he thought about Riki's own mercenary heart. "Riki is of a level all his own."

"It seems a near offensive waste of resources just to rescue one Blondie's pet."

Iason's eyes narrowed on the Onyx as he adjusted his gloves. "Riki is more than that, and I caution you to never speak against him again."

"Please, do not misunderstand. I was not disparaging him, or your choice of having him. I have felt your genuine feelings for him, and they were... impressive."

Iason stared at him. "How do you mean?"

"It was a bi-product of our link, it was not intentional."

"Ah yes, the link you claim saved my life."

"Your life, that I am unsure, but certainly your sanity."

"And you expect my gratitude?"

"No. I know you are incapable of such inclinations, and nor do I ask or expect it. I was merely making a statement."

"Gratitude is not something I offer to many, but that doesn't mean I cannot."

"You're afraid."

"Of?"

"Losing your pet to the life of a Prince, a much better life than what you can offer."

"Riki is *mine*. He will always be mine. These people who claim to be his family may very well be so, but it changes nothing."

"What if Riki wants to stay?"

"He doesn't."

"What if he did?"

“No!” Iason refused furious, and then almost immediately calmed down again. “Riki has made his choice and I am that choice. His pride would not allow him to go back on his word.”

Shiao nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, good work there on your part.”

“I offered him his freedom, he chose to stay.” Iason didn’t understand why he felt he had to justify himself to this...this thing. “I fail to see how any of this is of relevance to you, as I am sure that Jupiter will have you dismantled the moment we return to Amoï.”

His words had their intended effect when he saw Shiao stiffened perceptively.

“I intended no offence. I wished only to understand you better.”

“Why? Who I am has nothing to do with you.”

“No,” Shiao agreed quietly, even as he considered all that he had given Jupiter to assist in this creation. He had deliberately stayed away from learning anything about Iason, beyond some surface information that could not be helped to be known, due to business.

Now, however, that he had seen the being that he helped create, a being who was beyond legend not just on Amoï but through most of the galaxy as well, he could not help but want to know more. Perhaps it was his emotions malfunctioning, for he knew that whatever parts Jupiter had extracted from him for Iason ceased to be his long ago. Whoever Iason was now was due solely to Jupiter, and he had been merely a donor. And still...still he could not help but be curious.

“No, it has nothing at all to do with me,” he agreed, even as Guy reappeared, slightly breathless and hauling a guard’s uniform.

“Will this do?” he asked, and delighted in the slightly shocked look that Iason offered, before the Blondie hid it beneath a glare of contempt.

“Well done indeed,” Shiao smiled, dropping his hand onto Guy’s shoulder and squeezing.

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Raoul stood in Jupiter’s inner viewing chamber waiting for the AI to make an appearance again. He reported the plan that Katze had revealed to him and now waited for Jupiter’s decision. She had listened silently to his words, then her hologram vanished as she considered what to do.

Oddly, he felt a growing impatience as he waited, which was something he rarely experienced. He had to stop himself from pacing back and forth, which would be such an obvious acknowledgement of the abhorrent Human trait.

Since he had signed off from the communication with Katze he had been in somewhat of a strange mood. He assumed that Jupiter would insist he take a ship to Avalon and rescue Katze...No, rescue Iason and the pet. Katze could take care of himself, he had made that evident well enough in the past and he had no business wasting his concern on the former Furniture.

Still, that abomination was there with him, an unknown and unforeseen danger. He did not know much about the original series Onyx, other than they were flawed and had been destroyed by Jupiter because of these flaws. He could hardly believe there was one left alive; Jupiter was usually so thorough about such things. Despite the Onyx being the first of Jupiter’s creations, and technically his predecessors, Raoul felt only disgust at the idea that one of them had survived. It was truly appalling, like allowing one of his mutated experiments to live, it was simply unjustifiable.

He never should have sent Katze alone to a planet they knew nothing about, would still know nothing about, if not for Cal. It annoyed them that he could have made an error in judgement, as it was so rare for him to do so. Katze had been the logical choice, as the number of people they could trust at the time were limited, but there was probably someone he could have sent with the black market dealer.

He shook his head. No, his decision was sound, and Katze becoming injured was just a risk that had to be taken. Iason would surely take care of his man once they returned to Amoï and a few hours a regeneration chamber would make Katze as right as rain. Hmmm. Humans were not usually permitted in the chambers, they were for the Elites, however the occasional business associate paid handsomely for the privilege. An Elite may offer an hour or two in the rejuvenation chamber as a trade if it benefited them, but it was inadvisable to allow Humans to regenerate completely, as they may begin to think themselves immortal and above their class.

Therefore, the time was always limited to only a couple of hours for any Human who received the privilege. Iason had broken this rule of course, as he had so many others, by allowing his pet to spend days in the chamber. That of course, was approved by Jupiter, so Raoul could hardly challenge the decision.

Iason might allow Katze to use a chamber, but if he didn't Human health care was more than adequate on Amoï to get the red-head patched up, at least here in Tanagura and in Midas. A host of medical professionals specialized in rejuvenation surgeries so that one could continue to look young if they chose to, or have scarring removed, but it was costly and few had the funds to afford it or the time required for recovery.

Ceres and the outlining cities did not have access to proper medical facilities, but that was a lower class of Human anyway so that hardly mattered. There were government issued medical kits that offered sufficient chemical shots for pain or illness in such places, and if they suffered from something worse, what was one less Human?

He wondered if Katze did use the chamber for an extended period, would it return him to how he was before he became Furniture? Would he regain his manhood and desire? Perhaps if Iason vetoed the idea Raoul would offer it. It would be an interesting experiment to see how Katze dealt with having reproductive organs and desire again after so long without it. He smiled slowly. Yes, it would be a very interesting thing to watch and record.

Jupiter's hologram appeared before him, suddenly and without warning.

*Prepare my personal transport and ten thousand of our fleet.*

*It is to be war then?*

*A show of force is necessary. You will contact Katze and advise him that their plan is denied. The risk to the boy is too much.*

Raoul lifted an eyebrow. *You are worried for the pet?*

*Worry is a Human emotion. I require him here and unspoiled.*

*I will contact Katze but it may be too late. Did you wish me to accompany you on your transport or...*

*You will not attend.*

“I must!” Raoul was startled by the vehemence in his immediate reply. *I apologize for my tone. I have not been myself these past few hours.*

Although the accusation was subtle, Jupiter detected it.

*Your emotions are erratic and not attributed to your early awakening. Your feelings for the Furniture are clouding your judgement.*

For a brief moment, Raoul felt as if all his mechanical and organic systems slammed to a halt. One, two, three, four, five, six...The sensation faded after six point three seconds, a remarkably long time to an android.

*I do not understand this accusation, however if I have done something to offend you, I...*

*Your thoughts betrayed you when once we were joined. You think often of the Human with red hair, more so than you do of any other subjects.*

*You misunderstand. He intrigues me purely on a scientific level.*

Jupiter remained quiet and continued to stare at him with her octagon amethyst eyes until Raoul actually began to feel uncomfortable. She had



been privy to his thoughts, to his deepest fears and emotions with no conscious barrier to prevent her from seeing everything.

*It concerns me.* He admitted. *I am uncertain why I have this obsession with a Human, and so I can only assume that my interest is that of a scientist.*

*He is a grown man, not appropriate for a pet.*

*No. No he would not be a good pet.*

*Do you see him as a rival for Iason's loyalty and affection?*

*No. I am confident in my relationship with Iason and if I were to consider anyone a rival it would be his pet, but I have come to realize that Iason needs me for things that Riki cannot give him, just as Riki offers something I cannot. There is no real comparison between us.*

*Agreed. For the moment, you are needed here. It is apparent that the functionality of our society is precarious. A few of the problems have been discovered, but there may be more. You will remain and deal with any immediate issues in my stead.*

Her decision was a logical one, and Raoul had to concur. They could not leave Tanagura exposed at a time like this.

*What of the Onyx?*

*He is of low significance.*

*He is an abomination and must be destroyed!*

*Judgement is not yours to render. There will be time later for such things. Ready my ship to leave within the hour.*

Raoul nodded, turned and walked out of the chamber, where Cal and Anjell waited for him. Both immediately rose at his approach.

“We may have a problem,” Cal said quietly.

“Let’s add it to the pile, shall we?” Raoul returned and noticed that Anjell was paler than usual and his eyes were red, as if he had been crying. “What’s wrong with you?”

“His master has been looking for him and he is frightened of what will happen when he returns home.”

Although Rodin, Parasysl and the Platinum that had been part of the conspiracy against Iason and Riki had been interviewed and sequestered at their condos until Jupiter’s ruling, Raoul had no right to deny Rodin his pet any longer.

“He is a pet and belongs to Rodin. He must go where he belongs.”

Anjell paled even more, if that was possible and quietly nodded, defeated. “I...thank you for allowing me a reprieve for this short time, Master Raoul.” He turned to Cal. “Your kindness to me will always be remembered. Good bye.”

Anjell turned and walked out and Raoul noticed that Cal watched the boy until the door slid shut behind him. “Do you have something to say?” he demanded.

“I do not.” Cal returned his gaze to Raoul. “Do you require me for any other purpose, or should I return to where I belong?”

“We don’t know if those people who tried to take you are still around, so it would be better if you stay with me, for now.”

“As you wish.”

“I cannot keep a pet from his master, Cal,” Raoul stated as they left the outer chamber, sensing the Furniture’s disapproval and annoyed by it.

“Of course not, Sir.”

“Rodin won’t be too harsh with him, his circumstances behoves him to behave until judgement is received.”

“I am sure it will be as you say, Sir.”

While there was no difference in the young man’s tone than there was in anything he usually said, Raoul felt like Cal was judging him and he didn’t like it one bit. It was bad enough that Jupiter was accusing him of an error in judgement because of Katze, and now he was getting attitude from a Furniture.

They stepped through a portal and out into his condo. “I cannot flout the rules as your master so easily does!”

Cal’s eyes widened in surprise. “Of course, sir.”

“Stop it!”

“Stop what, sir?”

“I can hear your disapproval and I insist that you stop it.”

“It is not for me to disapprove or approve of anything anyone does, Sir.”

Cal was all innocence and confusion, but he wasn’t fooling Raoul for a minute. “Does this trick actually work on Iason?”

“Rarely, sir.”

Finally and admission of his guilt, Raoul thought and then almost laughed at the easy and unoffending way Cal had responded. “I can see why he’s changed your designation then.” He walked over to a small desk with multiple screens and settled in a high back chair as his own Furniture and two of his pets entered. “Get me a drink,” he ordered the Furniture who immediately turned back the way he had come as the pets curled on the sofa and awaited to see if their master would play with them.

He opened a channel on his communication system and spoke with the security member that was posted by Rodin’s condo. The main portals had been deactivated so he could not leave without being seen. “One of the pets is coming back, one Rodin was looking for. Make sure that no harm comes to him. Understood.”

The security officer seemed confused. “Am I to interfere in relations between Master and Pet, sir?”

“Not interfere, per se just...” Raoul glared at Cal, who remained quiet and expressionless by the portal. “Rodin can often have a heavy hand. Ensure that it does not get out of control.”

“Understood, Sir.”

Raoul ending that communication and then quickly sent instructions to ready Jupiter’s fleet. His Furniture returned with his drink, and after another few instructions, he addressed the two girls on the sofa. “Touch yourselves,” he demanded and pointed to the floor close to the desk but out of sight of the monitors. “Down there.”

The pets eagerly did as they were bid, removing their meager clothing and kissing and stroking each other.

“You can go back to Iason’s,” Raoul said to Cal. “But be careful, and I want you back here in two hours.”

“As you wish.”

“Would you like security to accompany you?”

“No, Sir, I believe I should be okay.”

“Alright then. Go.” Raoul didn’t even watch Cal leave, he still had to get hold of Katze and so he sent an incoming call to the red-head’s ship, hoping he was still there.

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Carrie and Riki entered his room and the two guards followed right after them. Yielia, who was also part of the entourage glanced uncomfortably at Riki, and then moved to block the guards from following any further.

“You will wait outside,” she ordered. “Maku requires privacy for his entertainment.”

“Our orders are to remain with him at all times.”

“The King has invited him to select a woman for the night,” she countered boldly. “Shall I tell him that his son was denied his enjoyment due to an audience?”

Both guards glanced at each other then back at her. “She could be dangerous,” the second one suggested.

Yiela glanced at the scantily clad woman behind them. “I can see no where she could conceal a weapon in that costume, however...” She stepped aside and waved them forward. “If you wish to search her...”

Both guards looked uncomfortable at the prospect, for there really was very little to the dancer’s outfit. “We will be right outside.”

“As long as you stay outside,” Yiela insisted.

When they left, she turned to Riki and bowed slightly. She hadn’t wanted to make the promise to find a way for him to be alone with the dancing girl the King had promised him, but his story of being nervous, having never being with a woman before, had both touched and appalled her. She would not want people watching either, were it her first time, and he had said that it would make him extremely happy to have sex with a girl, so she could not deny him. Besides, was it not what the King had intended for him?

“As you wished, Maku,” she said to softly, seeing the nervous but hopeful look in his eyes. “You will not be disturbed.”

“Thank you,” he returned shyly catching her hand between both of his. “Really, I owe you.”

“I live to serve you.” She offered him an encouraging smile. “Enjoy yourself.”

“I will.” Riki watched her walk out and close the door, and when he turned back to Carrie, who was beyond confused, said. “I didn’t know you could dance.”

Carrie blinked. “Riki?” Was it her Riki? He had seemed so different at the festival. No, it had to be a trick.

“You said pick you, so I did, but you owe me, because I *really* liked the red head that danced before you...Oww!”

Carrie punched him in the shoulder, hard, and then immediately pulled him into her arms. “It is you. I thought something was wrong with you! I thought they had done something to you and mmmrrmh!”

“Lower your voice,” he hissed and stepped out of her embrace. “They’re still outside.”

“Yes, right, sorry,” she whispered back.

“So, what’s the plan then?”

“We’ll go out the window.”

“Seriously?” He glared at her, but kept his tone quiet. “The windows and balcony are locked, remember?”

She smirked. “Did you think I wouldn’t come prepared? Turn around.”

“What? Why?”

“Do it.”

He huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, but turned his back on her. It was understandable that she might be worried about his behavior, he almost didn’t recognize himself either, after what the King had tried to do. He didn’t remember much about their talk, very damn little really and when he tried to remember, it really made his head hurt, like those memories Jupiter had helped him to unblock.

He remembered being escorted to the library, and then the next thing he knew the King was embracing him and calling him Ciel, and he was responding. He didn’t want to say those things, but he found the words

coming out of his mouth anyway. He accepted everything the King said, responded exactly as the King wanted him to, and it had been terrifying.

Each time he tried to respond honestly, each time he tried to fight the suggestive power that had overtaken him he felt such immense pressure in his brain that he was sure it would have exploded if he tried to fight further. He had returned obediently back to his chamber as the King rambled on about dancing girls and the festival. He accepted the women who waited there to strip and bathe him and then dress him again. It had been humiliating, but he could not stop himself from agreeing. Could not stop himself from accepting their touch and assistance.

Then Queen entered and she actually seemed to notice that he wasn't acting normally. He had screamed for help, even from her would have been okay, but again those protests never left his lips. It had been a totally horrendous experience, losing such utter control that way. Even with Iason he still had his mind, he could protest, he could fight, no matter how much pleasure or pain the Blondie inflicted. His body was Iason's to control but he'd still had his mind his free will to say Fuck You a hundred times or a thousand times. Whatever the King had done to him had stripped everything from him, everything but his conscience, which had continued to silently struggle.

When the Queen said his name, his real name, he'd felt a small release of pressure and just a touch more control. Then she mentioned Iason, and further release was achieved, but he was still responding in the way the King's suggestion demanded, and so he continued to push. Until he tasted that meat at the festival, the taste of it had reminded him of the day he and Iason had spent together during Junpin, and it had been the final barrier to break the King's hold.

Rather than fight back, as was his immediate thought, he realized that if he continued to pretend to be under the influence of whatever coercion that had ensnared him, he might be allowed more freedom. If the King still thought he had control, then he had to use the bastard's assumption against him, and it had worked. He was now alone in his room with Carrie.

“Can I turn around now? They're not gonna give us a lot of time...”

“Yes, you can turn around.”

He spun on his heel and his eyes brows rose at seeing her in her full tigress form. “Oh.” He glanced at the palm-sized instrument in her hand. “Do I want to know where you hid that?”

She smiled and went to the terrace. “Probably not.” It had taken some finessing, but she had managed to lift the instrument from a guard, which she learned was a seal removal. She ran it over the length of the glass doors, then pressed a blue button on the side and released a strange sonic wave.

“Did it work?” he asked, moving towards the doors.

“Let’s see.” She gripped the handle and pushed outwards, the door opened. “Looks like.”

“Amazing.” They stepped out onto the balcony, but when he saw how very high up they were, he scowled. “That’s a problem.”

“Nope.”

Before Riki could even squeak in protest, she grabbed him and leapt at least five or six feet to the nearby tree.

“Have you ever climbed a tree before?” she grinned as they perched in a high branch.

Riki froze, remembering the one and only time he had been in a tree, and as he looked at the ground far, far below, the full trauma of what he had seen as a child came flooding back.

“He...he’s dead. He’s dead!”

Concerned she turned to him. “Who’s dead?”

“Papa,” Riki was appalled when he started to shake and tears flooded his eyes. “I...I can’t...I have to stay in the tree. I can’t...he’s down there...It’s down there!”



Carrie covered his mouth with her hand, as his voice was rising. “Sssh, they’ll hear us!”

“He’s dead. Papa’s dead. Oh God. Oh God!”

“Damn it.” She knocked Riki unconscious with a solid clip to his jaw, then caught him before he toppled out of the tree. “You owe *me*, this time, buddy.” She hefted him over her shoulder and leapt to another tree, then another and another, readjusting him each time. The tree line allowed her to make the journey unseen, to the far end of the property where the performers had been housed for the festival.

She quickly descended and sprinted towards the change rooms, where she darted inside and set Riki on a small chaise . Closing and locking the door, she grabbed a left over glass of water and splashed it over Riki’s face, instantly rousing him.

“What! What are you doing?”

“Put these on,” she ordered throwing some sort of coloured garment at him. “Hurry, we’re behind schedule.”

Riki noticed that she looked like her normal self, the merchant Carrie he knew and liked. He picked up the fabric and realized it was a woman’s dress. “Are you out of your mind?”

“They’ll be looking for a Prince, not a Princess.”

“I’m not wearing women’s...”

“Seriously?” She turned her back, pulled off the dress she had been wearing and started to pull on a more modest gown. “It’s more than what I’ve see you wear in Tanagura most days.”

He glared at her, but realized that she was right, and they would be looking for a male. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“What does it matter as long as it gets us out of here?” She buttoned the dress up the front and turned to him. “What happened to you back there?”

“Back where?” he demanded as he shrugged out of the cape and tunic.

“In the tree?”

“We were in a tree?”

“You don’t remember? You were having a meltdown. I had to knock you out to shut you up.”

Riki paused with the dress halfway over his head as the memory came back to him and he shivered. “The King...he’s an imposter.”

“Why do you say that?” She stepped up and helped him pull the rest of the dress on; it hid his leggings and boots, so he didn’t have to be completely naked underneath.

“I saw him die,” Riki stated as she turned him around and quickly buttoned the gown. “I...I remember when I was here before, what happened before. We were on a picnic, Pa...that man and me and there was....They came, I don’t know what they are but they came and he told me to climb the tree, to be quiet and hide and not come down until he came back for me but...”

Riki broke off and lifted shimmering eyes to hers. He didn’t know why he felt like crying, he had no emotional connection to the man in his memory, he wasn’t sad or angry that the man was dead, and yet his vision blurred without thought.

“But?” she asked kindly as she arranged a shawl over both their heads in the local fashion she had seen some of the local women use.

“They caught him. They caught him and they killed him, right there, below the tree I was in.”

“And this is the man who is now the King?”

Riki nodded. “He’s not. He can’t be. I...I tried to say something, tried to challenge him about it earlier and he did something to me. He...” Riki shook his head as the headache started. “I can’t remember but he did something that made me say and do things that I didn’t want to say and do.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Carrie pulled him into her arms. “Do you think they really are your parents then?”

“I don’t know. He...he can’t be, but she...that woman...maybe. I don’t know,”

She kissed his cheek and pulled back. “We’ll figure it out,” she promised. “Right now, let’s get away from here and see if we can find Iason. Everything else can come later, okay?”

He nodded and then stepped back as she picked up a packet of face paint. “What do you intend to do with that?”

“You need to look the part.”

“No way!”

“Now Riki, don’t make me hurt you.”

Riki’s eyes widened as she grew closer with a feline grin.

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The King and Queen strolled towards the Prince's chambers, arm in arm.

“Would it not be more prudent to postpone our visit?” Celestia inquired quietly. “Perhaps our son is still engaged with the girl?”

“Nonsense! It has been over almost two hours, how long does one need for such things. Besides, we have business, Ciel and I, and it cannot wait.”

“What sort of business could not wait until tomorrow?” She stopped, pulled gently on his arm. “It is late, we should let them sleep.”

“No.” Nathaniel refused and continued forward. “The duties of a Prince does not depend on the time of day, it is good he learns this early on. He will help me with the Harvest ceremony, we will start a tradition.”

The Queen sighed and followed.

As she approached the chamber, the King noticed the two guards standing outside. "What are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"The Prince requested time alone with the girl, Sarum."

"I ordered you to remain with him at all times!"

"Nathaniel, he would not wish an audience while he was having relations..." Began the Queen but her husband ignored her and burst through the chamber doors. A roar of rage followed. "What is it? What's happened?" She hurried inside and found the room empty. "They've gone? But that isn't possible! The door is locked and..." She stared at the wide open balcony door, aghast.

The King turned, slowly to the guards and one of them cowered before him.

"The head maiden insisted we allow the Prince privacy, Sarum. She was but a girl!"

"Find them! If you value your lives, find them immediately!" he barked. "And arrest that interfering wench!"

The Queen gasped and caught the King's arm again. "You cannot arrest Yiel! She has been with us for years, since she was a girl..." Nathaniel angrily threw off her touch.

"She will be tried for treason," he stated coldly and stormed from the chamber.

"Stop this!" The Queen hurried after the King. "This is our fault! We tried to imprison Riki, you tried to control his mind! The ones to be punished is us!" When he didn't respond and continue to walk away she chased after him. "Nathaniel, what is *wrong* with you? You have been acting so strangely lately and I cannot fathom the cause."

He stopped, looked around at the now deserted corridor that just held the two of them, and grasped her arm. "Strange? How am I strange?"

“You have not been yourself since we lost our son, yet I gave credence to your behavior for you had suffered a trauma. Now, you seem stranger still and I can no longer believe that this is a result of emotional unease.”

He released her, instantly. “I must go to prepare the bodies.”

“Now? Our son is missing! Why would you...?”

“It is my duty!”

“Your duty! To hell with your duty! I have watched you hole yourself up in that godforsaken cellar every year for days on end and yet your behavior only continues to grow more alarming. You have not found relief or forgiveness, and you refuse to seek counsel.” She moved to him again, put her arms around him, and pleaded with him. “My love, tell me the truth. I am ever at your side, but I cannot help you if you do not trust me. The dead can wait, our son cannot.”

“Trust you? How can I trust you? You would wish our son gone from here, back to that hellacious planet to be a pet to a machine!”

“No! I do not want that, but nor do I wish him to feel a captive here either! Interfering with his mind was uncalled for and very unlike you. The Nathaniel I know would never have...”

“The Nathaniel you know?” His grip on her tightened suddenly. “What is it that you think you know? You are but a woman and cannot understand the demands of the King!”

Her hand striking his face was enough to cause him to stumble back and release her, he had forgotten that she had also once been a warrior.

“You are *not* my King,” she stated boldly. “My King would never say such a thing. Whatever has been done to you, whatever has changed you, you are no longer the man that I pledged my life to and I will not tolerate your insolence any longer. You will seek counseling immediately to discuss whatever issues you are having, and are forthwith stripped of your duties as King!”

Nathaniel stared at her. While he ruled supreme, only the Queen had the power to overrule him. The law was created to prevent a madman or brute becoming King and ruling the people ineffectively, and that was why a Queen was usually chosen based on her mental stability and purity of heart. However, he was too close to what he wanted to allow such a law to prevent him from getting it.

“My love,” he said as he stepped forward. “You are correct, of course. I am not myself and you are wise to judge me. I ask only that you take this moment between us and allow me to say, how very much...” His hand slid to a pocket in his cloak and retrieved the knife. “I despise you.”

Celestia's eyes widened in shock as she realized what was about to happen, and her mouth formed words with no sound as the knife pierced her ribs and slid smoothly through her heart.

He knelt as her body became dead weight and cradled her in his arms, enjoying the moment before crying out.

“Guards! Guards! Someone, help me!”

A moment later several people, guards included hurried from both sides of the corridor and gasped at the horrific scene before them.

“It was the android! It has killed your Queen!”

## Chapter 30

### Summary for the Chapter:

The King's true colors start to show, Riki makes a hard choice and Jupiter arrives at Avalon

### Notes for the Chapter:

Holy Crap! Thirty chapters?! This thing has really run away from me...Believe it or not this story was supposed to end after Junpin, but then I lost the drive that I had most of it written on and as I was re-writing it took off in a totally different direction! At least you still seem to be enjoying it, I hope!

Sorry for any typo's I am rushing to get this up before the next wave of chaos hits! Thank you thank you thank you for all the Comments and Kudos!

Iason had disguised himself as a guard along with Guy, and had walked through the palace gates just as the alarms sounded.

“That’s not good,” Guy muttered as they watched other guards start to run for the palace. “Should we follow them?”

Iason nodded. He was annoyed to have the mongrel with him, but Guy was the only one who could have accompanied him. Iason had insisted he could handle the task alone, but Shiao reasoned that if nothing else, Guy could provide a distraction as he was very good at such things. He'd had to give his word to return with Guy, unharmed, but if the mongrel got shot by a guard or trampled in the run, who was he to prevent his fate?

“You two!” The Captain of the guard suddenly ordered, calling to them. “Stay at the gate, report immediately if you see the Prince and a woman.”

“The Prince and a woman?” Iason repeated in the local’s own language, having already mastered it.

“Yes, she has kidnapped Maku, she may also look like a cat. Report if you see anything!”

The Captain strode off and Iason and Guy wandered back to the gate.

“Riki has escaped with Carrie.”

“Carrie?” Guy asked, still confused.

“The woman, or cat, depending on her form at the moment.”

“Oh Shit! Is she the one with the tail?”

Iason's eyes narrowed on him. “You have seen her?”

“Yeah! She was outside of Riki's bedroom window, she scaled the walls or something but she couldn't get in. She and Riki were writing notes back and forth, but I didn't understand it. Something about dancing girls and...”

Iason laughed and the change in his demeanor was shocking to a mongrel who only ever saw the android angry or devoid of emotion.

“Impressive,” he chuckled. He had almost forgotten about the lovely merchant that had fought so bravely for Riki. “Come, if they have escaped they would try to make their way to a ship.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know Riki.”

Guy made a face at Iason behind his back, then hurried to catch up as Iason strode through the palace gate and towards the main interior of the village.

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Riki tripped on the long skirts for the third time and swore. “How the *fuck* do they walk in these things?”



Carrie, who had no issues with her own dress smirked, then turned and pulled him behind some trees, they were still a good half mile from the village, and several people, including palace guards had passed them, but she had insisted they stroll, rather than run, so as to not give themselves away. So far it was working, no one had stopped them or given them a second glance.

She crouched in front of him, and ripped a slit up the front of the skirt. "Take off the pants."

Riki did so eagerly, then tossed them into a bush. The damn things were itchy as hell, and although he still felt constricted by the strange undergarment they had fitted around his dick, he decided to leave it on since the front of the skirt was mostly open.

Carrie smiled and had to admit, he had great gams. "Better?"

He tried walking again and found the skirt wasn't getting caught up in his feet as much. "Loads!" he admitted as he helped her to her feet. "Thanks."

"Okay, let's get moving."

They started off down the road again and walked in silence. Riki's thoughts were filled with finding Iason and getting away from here, and yet other thoughts started to push ahead of those ones. He thought of Yielia, the woman who had essentially helped him and Carrie escape. Would they punish her? How bad would it be? She hadn't known what they had planned so it wouldn't be right for her to be hurt because of it. Riki knew all about being punished for no good reason and how it felt to be so out of control of what was being done to you. And what about the Queen? Did she know what the King was? She had spoken of him as a good man, conveyed such love and tenderness for him, could she have been lying about that? Was she also an imposter?

He thought about it, really thought about it for the first time in a way he hadn't allowed himself to before. There were things that he had found familiar about her, and he was had pretty good instincts about when someone was bullshitting him. He'd never really trusted the King, but the

Queen...The Queen was different. He may not have trusted her but nor had he feared her. The King had not felt right from the beginning, and now Riki knew why, because if that man had been his real father, he was no longer. The Queen, he had almost no memories, no flashes of her, but she knew about his love of chocolate, and how he liked gardens. She had never tried to force him to accept anything and she had been...well, not really kind to Iason, but certainly more accommodating than the King had been.

What if she didn't know? What if the King became so enraged that Riki had escaped that he hurt her? He'd seen first-hand what obsession and anger could do, and the King had definitely been obsessed with him. There was some sort of plan for him, he realized this now, something the King had intended for him that was outside of a father-son relationship. Not that he had any idea what a father-son relationship entailed, but he trusted his instincts, and his instincts had screamed danger every time he was in the King's presence.

If he felt that way just for himself and he had somehow ruined whatever plan the King had for him, how desperate would that make the King? The man had obviously gone to some lengths to get him here and play the doting father, but Riki had not been fooled. He had nothing to compare it too of course, but the King's 'fatherly' presentation had seemed off from the very beginning somehow.

Why were so many people obsessed with him, he really didn't understand it. First Iason, then Guy now the King. He couldn't grasp it. He was just a simple-minded mongrel from Ceres. The only thing he had going for him was his body, and a little bit of common sense when it came to computers, yet everyone always seemed to be after him for one thing or another.

Except the Queen, and Yiel. They had treated him with respect and affection. They had asked things of him but had not really pushed or threatened him if they didn't get it, which was how everyone else seemed to behave. And he had run, like a coward, and left them to their fate.

No, it wasn't his problem what happened to them. He didn't ask to be kidnapped and brought here. It was their own fault really for starting this mess. It wasn't his problem and it would be better to just get the hell away

from this planet and go back to Amoï, to a life he knew; to being a mongrel and a pet. Only...he didn't want to go back to it. He didn't want to be stared at and laughed at and fucked with again.

"Fuck." Riki stopped walking.

Carrie turned. "What's wrong?"

He curled his hands into fists, looked back where he could still see the higher turrets of the castle. A useless mongrel. A filthy pet. There was no purpose for someone like him, but the Queen and Yiel...they had a purpose. They were strong and respected and they took care of others. Was he really going to just walk away from the only family he might ever have? Didn't he owe something to the woman, to the woman who gave birth to him, whether he remembered her or not?

"I...I have to go back."

Her eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Riki groaned, then turned and started quickly walking back towards the palace before he changed his mind, again. "Shit. Fuck. Fuck, shit!"

Carrie chased after him. "What are you doing?" Had whatever control the King had over him before returned? She grabbed his shoulders, shook him. "Riki! Riki come back to me!"

"It's still me!" he insisted. "It's not that, but I have to go back!"

"You can't go back! What if they try and control you again? What if they decided to sacrifice you on an altar, or cut you up and serve you as stew?" She had told Riki about the strange things she had seen in the cellar and about the rumors of the Harvest that she had heard.

"I have to go back!"

"You tell me why! You give me a good reason, young man, or I will knock you out carry you away myself."

Riki smirked. "Wouldn't that draw attention that we are trying to avoid?"

"A reason! A good one!"

Riki averted his eyes, then looked at the road ahead of them and again back at the castle. "She...she's my mother," he whispered and the admission almost killed him. He suffered both hot flashes and cold shivers simultaneously. "She doesn't know. She doesn't know what he is."

Carrie's heart broke for him. They were so close to freedom, and only now he remembered that which had caused him such trauma and heartbreak these last few days. Riki knew that Iason would not be waiting back the way they had come. He knew that they might both be imprisoned or put to death should they return, well, she certainly would. Carrie had enough of cages when she was a child, and Riki certainly yearned for freedom. He did not want to be here, did not want to stay here.

"Damn it to hell," she growled. "That's a pretty good reason." She suddenly pulled him into her embrace for a quick hug. "That's the only reason." She cherished her freedom, but it had cost her a family, friends, and entire race that were like her. She had lost everyone, and she would not allow Riki to suffer the same fate.

"Carrie?"

She took his hand and started back the way they had come. "Let's go save your mom."

Riki blinked back tears that suddenly stung his eyes as they started to run.

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"Status." Jupiter's voice echoed through the massive silver and gold flag ship that she had transferred half her consciousness into.

“We should reach orbit of the planet Avalon in thirty-five minutes,” stated the uniformed Sapphire, seated in the Captain’s chair on the main bridge. “We have scanned their weapons systems and they are impressive, however we can easily decimate them if necessary.”

“Have they detected our ships?”

“If they have, they have made no move to raise their defenses. Do we intend to surprise them?”

“It matters not. They will return what is mine. It is inevitable.”

“Captain.”

The Sapphire turned to his navigation officer. “Speak.”

“I am detecting a strange signature behind Avalon’s moon.”

The Captain rose. “What sort of signature?”

“I do not recognize it, Sir.”

There was a momentary hum and then the navigator’s panel started flashing. Once again Jupiter’s voice rose through the ship.

“It is the Vliphehshie.”

“The Vliphehshie?” The Captain repeated, perplexed. “They are from the Omega system. What could they be doing so far from their home?”

“Unclear. One thing is certain, this Avalon appears to be more than what it seems.”

“Indeed. Raise shields.”

“Belay that,” Jupiter responded. “We are but a single ship, we are no threat to them.”

The rest of the fleet had been told to standby, with coordinates to jump to their location at Jupiter's order. The flagship could not jump, as the effects could often scatter and disorient Jupiter's consciousness and so she had traveled at regular warp to their destination.

"Shall we open communications to the surface?" The Captain asked.

"Soon."

Jupiter surveyed the readings of the planet in their path. Green with lush forests and blue with wide oceans. It was a pretty little planet with much to offer in natural resources, however Jupiter had learned long ago, from her original makers, that such planets bred destruction. She had seen how the greed of Humans had raped the resources of a lush planet once before, how their need for advancement had polluted their air, destroyed their ozone and stunted the health and minds of generations due to a dependency on technology. That dependency left them unable to cope and adjust to the strict limitations imposed when the result of their arrogance caused catastrophic changes to their planet.

The Humans here would be no different. While Jupiter could detect no significant pollution in their atmosphere and their technology was, while not on par with Amoï, still substantial, they appeared to be using natural methods for energy and replenishing whatever they used. This would change, it always did. Eventually they would grow tired of such a simplistic life and it would be the beginning of the end for this planet.

Amoï had once been lush and green, now it was barren in many places, but those cities that Jupiter had replenished and continued to sustain. Humans were a disease that should be wiped out, and yet she had found a minor use for them.

She had such a use for one particular Human. Through him she had found new insight into their ways and had developed a better understanding of her own needs and desires. She had developed a connection to him that was different from any of the others and she would not let him go. He would return with her, he and Iason, and this would cause satisfaction on the whole. Iason wanted the boy, needed the boy. Jupiter understood that now,

because she too wanted the boy. She would not allow any harm to come to him.

\*\*\*\*\*

The King sat in a candle-lit room, trying not to pace, and pretending to mourn the Queen, who's body had been washed and redressed in her finest gown and now lay displayed on a raised platform, surrounded by fresh flowers. A selection of hand maidens stood nearby, weeping.

He had only until midnight to find the Prince, and take what he had been patiently waiting all these years for. The Queen had been pregnant when the Prince had been lost, and so he had not been too concerned with finding the boy after his alteration. He only needed the one child, and so he played the part of a grieving, but loving husband to the best of his ability for ten years. Ten wasted years!

It became apparent, as the Princess grew, that she did not possess the Gift he required, but instead had been born with the gift of insight. She had never really taken to him, had always been wary of him. She cried when he held her and instinctively refused to be alone with him, even as a babe, regardless of how he tried to woo her. As she grew into adolescence he realized she would soon recognize her power for what it was, and that would be the end of him. There had been no other choice, he had to get rid of the girl.

The Queen was nearly bedridden with grief after being told the Princess had wandered off and fallen down a deep well, her pretty, fragile neck broken by the fall. He did suffer some regret that the woman had lost not one but two of her children, but he quickly turned that regret to his advantage. He used his supposed grief explain his new obsession with finding the long lost Prince. The Queen would never become pregnant with his seed, and so this boy was his last chance. If he did not perform the ceremony with the Prince at the stroke of midnight tonight, all of this would have been for nothing.

“Sarrum.”

The King glanced up at the robed figure in the doorway. “Have you found them?” he demanded.

“No, my Lord.”

“She is a cat! How can she not have been found?”

“We have searched every area of the palace and the entirety of the city has been overturned.”

“Then look beyond the city, the villages, the fields!”

“Sarum, they could not have gotten that far...”

The King rose in a flourish of robes and faced the messenger. “Underestimating these aliens is what has cost me my wife and now possibly my son! We cannot assume anything!”

The man bowed. “Yes, Sarum. I will send more men immediately.”

The King took several deep breaths, his hands were shaking. “Have the transportation centers been shut down?”

“Of course, all traffic has been grounded.”

“It seems necessary to activate the Grid. Find the Prince before the stroke of midnight or you will pay the price with your life.”

“Yes Sarrum. At once.”

The King glanced at his handmaidens. “Leave me!”

They nodded and exited the chamber immediately and the moment they had, the King strode out of the chamber and down the hall. He entered the throne room, crossed the shining floors and stepped into his alcove.

“Now my dear, have you had time to reconsider your answers?”



A trembling, naked woman lay curled in the corner, her back and legs streaked red from the whips he had used on her earlier.

Yiela was part Monuzine, an ancient and telepathic race, and so her mind was too strong and guarded for him to control. As the King, he knew she would never dare attempt to read his mind, but even if she had, he had blocks in place to prevent it. Unfortunately, because of this circumstance on both their parts, he'd had to resort to a more distasteful method to gain her cooperation.

"I have told you all I know," Yiela stated quietly, which was not entirely true.

She had sensed something about the dancing girl the moment she had seen her, and it was stronger still when they had returned to the Prince's chamber, but the few pieces she had accidentally garnered from the woman led Yiela to believe that the Prince would be in no danger and so she had kept her promise.

Maku had not been himself, it had been obvious that someone has interfered with his mind but she could bring such allegations to light, as it was not her place. Instead, she had done as Maku requested, against her better judgement. Now Maku had escaped, her Queen was dead and the King had become a madman. She had only the Prince to hold on to and she would not betray him.

The King sighed and poured himself a drink. "That is a shame, for if you have nothing to offer me, I have no further use for you." He sipped his drink quietly for a moment, then signaled for a guard who appeared immediately. "This woman has been found guilty of conspiring with the enemy and betraying the crown. She is to be executed for treason."

The guard appeared taken aback by the sight of bleeding and battered Serago to the Prince, but moved forward and gripped the woman's arm.

Yiela rose on unsteady legs, and lifted her head proudly. "Am I to be paraded before everyone in this way, my lord?" she demanded and had the satisfaction of seeing the King flinch, ever so slightly.

“No.” He tossed her a cloak. “I would not have my people see you in this state, they are aggrieved enough. You have served our family loyally for many years and that has not been forgotten.” He nodded to the guard. “Take her to the disintegration chamber.”

Yiela bowed her head gratefully, hers would at least be a quick death. “Thank you, Sarrum.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Iason's keen vision spotted a couple of women running towards him, and he started to step out of the way to let them pass, but as they did, something about the smaller woman seemed familiar and he scowled. “Excuse me?”

The shorter woman froze, quickly turned back and gaped at the two guards. “I...Iason?” He would know that voice anywhere. “Is that you?”

Iason stared down into familiar obsidian eyes. “Riki!” No other thoughts entered his head other than crushing his beloved to him and capturing the mongrel's mouth.

Riki allowed himself to be caught up in the moment, filled with relief that Iason had survived the Deep Sleep, but then he started to push at Iason's chest. “Stop,..”

“Never!” Iason covered Riki's mouth again and the mongrel moaned before catching himself and wrenching his mouth away.

“Later, we have to go!”

Iason suddenly remembered Guy and finally gave his attention to the second, paler woman. “Carrie?”

“Hi ya.”

“Thank you.” He reached for her hand, squeezed it. “Thank you for getting him out of there.”

“Um...well, you may not be so grateful when he tells you...”

“I have to go back!”

“Back?” Iason stared at Riki. “Back? Have you lost your mind?”

“I have to! Iason, the King isn't the King. I have to warn her!”

“Warn who?”

“The Queen!”

“Why? They are nothing to you, Riki. They kidnapped you and have been forcing their will on you ever since. They even had you dress as a woman!”

Carrie shifted uncomfortably. “Uh...actually that was my idea.”

“It matters not. The point is...”

“Iason. This isn't the first time someone has manipulated and imprisoned me,” Riki stated quietly. “I didn't run then and I won't run now.”

Iason felt a twinge of annoyance. Riki couldn't possibly be comparing these people to what he had done. It was totally different! “For the record, you did run.”

“No. You freed me, or pretended to, so I thought I could leave.”

Iason wanted to point out that Riki fought against him and tried to run away several times during those first two years. “It isn't the same!” He didn't wish to be compared to these backwater people, he didn't want to be compared to anyone. It left a bad taste in his mouth and a hollow feeling in his chest that he could not find reason for.

“It really is,” Guy stated, unable to keep his mouth shut any longer. “You stole Riki away, kept him prisoner, forced him to do...things he didn't want

any part of. You stole three years of his fucking life!”

Iason's eyes flashed red and his appearance immediately reverted to that of a Blondie. He'd had enough of this mongrel. “Now, you die.”

“Iason!” Riki put his hands against Iason's chest, not that he would be able to stop the android if he decided to kill Guy, but he hoped Iason would consider reason. . “Damn it Stop! We don't have time for this!”

“I should have killed you back at Dana Bahn!” Iason pushed passed Riki and made a grab for Guy, but the mongrel dodged and scurried back.

“I would have taken you with me, you prick!”

“Your Onyx is not here to save you now.”

“Stop it! Both of you!” Riki screamed at them, but they were already locked in combat. Riki's head was starting to hurt again, and he was having trouble focusing. He shuffled forward to get between them but then he stopped and couldn't move any further. “I don't want this,” he murmured as he held his aching head between his hands. “I don't want this.” People fighting over him, people trying to kill each other. It was stupid and foolish. The pressure was building and his hands were starting to sweat. “I don't want this!” he cried out as a flash of light blinded him, and then darkness followed.

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Cal entered Iason's condo quietly and he thought without disruption, however Bean appeared almost in an instant and he braced himself.

“Where have you been?” the Furniture demanded and hurried to Cal's side. “I went to the medical center and they said you had left. I have been looking everywhere for you and I cannot find Master Iason or the pet and...”

“They are off planet,” Cal advised calmly, but took a step back from Bean, just in case. He was still not sure if the boy could be trusted. “There was no

time to inform you and I was on an assignment for Master Iason.”

“But you were injured!”

“I heal rather quickly.” Cal stepped around Bean and headed for his room. “If you will excuse me, I am only here for a moment.”

Bean caught Cal’s arm. “Tell me what is going on! I am the Furniture of this household, not you! I cannot do my job if I am not kept informed. Master Iason will be displeased with me if I do not do my job!”

“In this instance it isn’t necessary for you to know the details. I would suggest only to have the house in order for when the Masters return.”

“You don’t need to tell me how to run a household, I have been doing it for some time!”

Cal snatched his arm away. “Then do it and leave me to my business.” He had to report back to Raoul in two hours, and he would like to take a shower, change his clothes and perhaps get something to eat.

“Fine, would you like me to fix you something to eat?”

“No, I can manage.”

“The kitchen here is my domain, if you wish to eat something I will prepare it for you, as is my duty.”

Apparently Bean had forgotten about his little speech about being friends earlier, for he was back to being his usual snotty self. Ah well, it wasn’t as if Cal had expected anything different. “A sandwich would be fine, thank you.”

Bean nodded and strode off towards the kitchen as Cal continued to his room. He quickly undressed and took a much needed shower, scrubbed himself clean, and then redressed in clean clothes. It still felt odd for him not to wear the usual uniform of a Furniture, however he was slowly getting used to casual clothes.

He unlocked his terminal and checked his messages, there were a surprising few, but they were mostly in superficial replies from requests he had made for new subject courses for Riki. He quickly replied to them, and as he was finishing off the last one, Bean appeared at his door with a tray.

“I brought you a drink as well, and the sandwich is vegetable spread and cheese.”

“That’s fine, Bean, thank you for going to the trouble.”

Bean remained in the doorway as Cal continued to work on his terminal. “Are you not going to eat it?”

“I will in a moment.”

“Why wait?”

“Why are you so eager for me to eat?” Cal volleyed and turned to stare at the younger boy. “Did you put something unsavory in it?”

Bean’s eyes grew wide and Cal realized that the youth was still quite green for a Furniture. He allowed his emotions to show far too often, but he also knew that what he had said was a horrible insult to any Furniture.

The boy stalked over picked up the sandwich and took a large bite, he then put it back on the plate. “I do my job well, do not accuse me of such things again!”

Cal watched Bean storm out and sighed. He really was not trying to pick a fight, but Bean still did not understand the rules of Furniture. You could let nothing upset you. Nothing could annoy you or anger you or make you happy, you were a blank slate and were completely at the whims of what others felt.

He picked up the sandwich and took a bite, had to admit that it was very good, but a little dry, then he reached for the glass of milk.

Bean waited just outside the room until he heard the tell-tale thump, then he stepped back through the doorway and stared at the glass of spilled milk on

the floor next to Cal's unconscious form.

"You will never insult me again, pet-lover."

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Iason was the first to recover from the blast, and he quickly rolled to his feet and hurried to Riki's prone form. "Riki? Riki!" He shook Riki but received no response so he pulled him into his arms and held his chest to his ear. "No. No!"

"What is it?" Carrie asked, crawling towards him, her equilibrium was shot from intensity of power that had hit them, her ears rang in a painful rhythm. "What...what's wrong?"

"He's not breathing!"

For the first time, Iason experienced panic. He could not calm himself to devise a method of aid, could not comprehend what to do next. All he knew was that his beloved was lying dead in his arms.

"Shit! Shit!" Guy dropped beside Iason and put his hand over Riki's mouth. "Lay him down!"

"No! He is mine!"

"I have to get him breathing again, you fucker, now lay him down!"

Carrie had to pry Riki from Iason's arms and once he was laying on his back, she helped Guy perform CPR.

Iason stared, confused, unsettled. Resuscitation, yes, why had he not realized that was what was needed? But why did Guy have to touch his lips to Riki's? He didn't like it! "Stop.."

Guy shoved Iason back and they were both momentarily startled that he managed to topple the Blondie off his knees and onto his ass.

“Breathe, Riki,” Guy demanded as he pushed more air into his friend's mouth. “Come on. If you don't breathe Iason really will kill me.”

Carrie pumped Riki's chest in coordination with Guy's breaths and offered a prayer to whatever Gods might be listening. She had not believed in such things since she was young and had lost what was left of her race, but if it would bring this boy back to them, she would believe. She would believe in anyone and anything if it helped Riki to live.

Finally, Riki started to cough weakly and Guy closed tear filled eyes in relief.

“S...stop, fight...ing,” he gasped and a moment later he was being crushed in Iason's arms again. “Stop.”

“No. I'll never stop,” Iason swore and felt a strange rhythm just below where his rib cage might be, if he had one. “I'll never let you go again.”

“Can't...breathe!”

Iason immediately loosened his hold. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, love. I am so very sorry.” Iason caressed Riki's face, then gently pulled him back against his chest and closed his eyes.

“Stop...tryin' to...kill...Guy.”

Iason released a soft chuckle “Very well. For you I will let him live.”

“Gee thanks,” Guy mocked and then flinched when Carrie whacked him hard in the shoulder. It hurt because it wasn't his artificial side. “Hey! I'm the one who got him breathing again!”

“Ass.” Riki weakly reached for Guy, who took his hand. “You...just wanted...to kiss me...”



The simple gesture and joke almost started Guy bawling again, but he pushed it back. “Well, obviously,” he grinned, ignoring the death glare Iason shot him.

“Last time,” Riki said, meeting Guy's eyes with a depth of emotion that shocked them both and Guy understood perfectly.

“Yeah,” he nodded, squeezing Riki's hand and slowly, finally released all that was left of his love for the mongrel. He could now let Riki go. “For old time's sake.”

Riki pulled his hand away and slid it up around Iason's neck to pull the Blondie down. Their lips met in a sweet, familiar kiss. “More to come for you.”

Iason smiled, truly smiled and Carrie was fascinated at the site as she stepped forward.

“Sorry to interrupt this poignant moment, but has anyone forgotten that we were almost blasted into oblivion by something that came from him?” She pointed at Riki who blinked, startled.

“Me?”

“Yes, Riki,” Iason returned. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That attack you caused.”

“Attack? What are you talking about?” All three stared at him and he felt himself grow self-conscious. “Cut it out! What did I do?”

“We'll discuss it later,” Iason decided as he rose and lifted Riki into his arms. “We have more pressing matter to attend to.”

“Put me down,” the mongrel insisted and started to struggle, until he watched Iason's appearance change back to that of local guard.

“I am assisting a damsel in distress back to the palace.”

“I’m not a fucking damsel!” Riki insisted, then paused. Iason was allowing him to go back? “Wait...The palace?”

“I don’t agree it is our best course of action, but if it means so much to you then I will take you back.”

Riki wished he could explain to Iason just how very much it did mean to him, but he was still trying to figure it out himself. “Okay. Good. I can walk...” However, Riki found that the more he moved the more his head spun. “Fuck it.” He slid his other arm around Iason’s neck and buried his face in the crook of it. “Just get me there.”

“Excuse me, miss,” Guy said stepping in front of Iason and pulling Riki’s torn skirt a little tighter around the mongrel’s legs. “Your virtue is showing.”

Carrie giggled before she could help herself as Riki swatted at Guy’s hand and flushed a bright crimson.

“Keep your hands away from my dick!” Riki stabbed a finger towards the mongrel. “If you ever, ever tell anyone about this and I’ll kick your ass!”

“Honestly, Riki,” Guy chuckled. “No one who knows you would believe me.”

## Chapter 31

### Summary for the Chapter:

I receive a message from a reader that they were surprised to hear the Queen was dead and asked how she had died. Apparently I somehow deleted or cut a scene at the end of Chapter 29 to explain this, so I am posting the scene here. I have also added it to chapter twenty nine, so if you are new to reading it or you have just read that chapter you can skip this one.

Humble apologies....begs and grovels for forgiveness.

Also I know you are waiting for me to post another REAL chapter and I will, very soon, but as there are only two chapters left I want to make them count so have rewritten them five times already and they are still not quite what I want, so please bear with me.

The King and Queen strolled towards the Prince's chambers, arm in arm.

“Would it not be more prudent to postpone our visit?” Celestia inquired quietly. “Perhaps our son is still engaged with the girl?”

“Nonsense! It has been over almost two hours, how long does one need for such things. Besides, we have business, Ciel and I, and it cannot wait.”

“What sort of business could not wait until tomorrow?” She stopped, pulled gently on his arm. “It is late, we should let them sleep.”

“No.” Nathaniel refused and continued forward. “The duties of a Prince does not depend on the time of day, it is good he learns this early on. He will help me with the Harvest ceremony, we will start a tradition.”

The Queen sighed and followed.

As the approached the chamber, the King noticed the two guards standing outside. “What are you doing out here?” he demanded.

“The Prince requested time alone with the girl, Sarum.”

“I ordered you to remain with him at all times!”

“Nathaniel, he would not wish an audience while he was having relations...” Began the Queen but her husband ignored her and burst through the chamber doors. A roar of rage followed. “What is it? What's happened?” She hurried inside and found the room empty. “They've gone? But that isn't possible! The door is locked and...” She stared at the wide open balcony door, aghast.

The King turned, slowly to the guards and one of them cowered before him.

“The head maiden insisted we allow the Prince privacy, Sarum. She was but a girl!”

“Find them! If you value your lives, find them immediately!” he barked. “And arrest that interfering wench!”

The Queen gasped and caught the King's arm again. “You cannot arrest Yiel! She has been with us for years, since she was a girl...” Nathaniel angrily threw off her touch.

“She will be tried for treason,” he stated coldly and stormed from the chamber.

“Stop this!” The Queen hurried after the King. “This is our fault! We tried to imprison Riki, you tried to control his mind! The ones to be punished is us!” When he didn't respond and continue to walk away she chased after him. “Nathaniel, what is *wrong* with you? You have been acting so strangely lately and I cannot fathom the cause.”

He stopped, looked around at the now deserted corridor that just held the two of them, and grasped her arm. “Strange? How am I strange?”

“You have not been yourself since we lost our son, yet I gave credence to your behavior for you had suffered a trauma. Now, you seem stranger still and I can no longer believe that this is a result of emotional unease.”

He released her, instantly. "I must go to prepare the bodies."

"Now? Our son is missing! Why would you...?"

"It is my duty!"

"Your duty! To hell with your duty! I have watched you hole yourself up in that godforsaken cellar every year for days on end and yet your behavior only continues to grow more alarming. You have not found relief or forgiveness, and you refuse to seek counsel." She moved to him again, put her arms around him, and pleaded with him. "My love, tell me the truth. I am ever at your side, but I cannot help you if you do not trust me. The dead can wait, our son cannot."

"Trust you? How can I trust you? You would wish our son gone from here, back to that hellacious planet to be a pet to a machine!"

"No! I do not want that, but nor do I wish him to feel a captive here either! Interfering with his mind was uncalled for and very unlike you. The Nathaniel I know would never have..."

"The Nathaniel you know?" His grip on her tightened suddenly. "What is it that you think you know? You are but a woman and cannot understand the demands of the King!"

Her hand striking his face was enough to cause him to stumble back and release her, he had forgotten that she had also once been a warrior.

"You are *not* my King," she stated boldly. "My King would never say such a thing. Whatever has been done to you, whatever has changed you, you are no longer the man that I pledged my life to and I will not tolerate your insolence any longer. You will seek counseling immediately to discuss whatever issues you are having, and are forthwith stripped of your duties as King!"

Nathaniel stared at her. While he ruled supreme, only the Queen had the power to overrule him. The law was created to prevent a madman or brute becoming King and ruling the people ineffectively, and that was why a

Queen was usually chosen based on her mental stability and purity of heart. However, he was too close to what he wanted to allow such a law to prevent him from getting it.

“My love,” he said as he stepped forward. “You are correct, of course. I am not myself and you are wise to judge me. I ask only that you take this moment between us and allow me to say, how very much...” His hand slid to a pocket in his cloak and retrieved the knife. “I despise you.”

Celestia's eyes widened in shock as she realized what was about to happen, and her mouth formed words with no sound as the knife pierced her ribs and slid smoothly through her heart.

He knelt as her body became dead weight and cradled her in his arms, enjoying the moment before crying out.

“Guards! Guards! Someone, help me!”

A moment later several people, guards included hurried from both sides of the corridor and gasped at the horrific scene before them.

“It was the android! It has killed your Queen!”

## Chapter 32

### Summary for the Chapter:

God! Where to begin? \* takes deep breath\* In no particular order-Riki and the others make it to the palace, Shiao and Guy learn that the Queen is dead. Jupiter demands her property back, the King just keeps being a bastard....Horrific things happen with Cal (Sorry it may not flow with the rest of this chapter but it is important for the third part of the sequel and I had to put it in somewhere) Yiel's fate starts to turn and Katze gets fed up waiting.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Please forgive any grammar mistakes I am rushing to get this up before I have to rush off for a few days out of town. Thank you, thank you, thank you for all your wonderful patience and support and please, please, please review because aside from the last chapter this is the one I am most nervous about.

Riki and his recovered crew arrived back at the castle and were immediately stopped by four guards, refusing them further admittance.

“These women have information on the Prince,” Iason stated. “They will only give their information to the King.”

“Not possible,” The guard denied. “You will give me the information and we will return for you if the Captain deems it important.”

“Are you really gonna risk pissing off the King by letting this information walk away?”

The guard who had been speaking narrowed his eyes on Guy. “You speak oddly for one of us,” he stated moving closer.

“Actually, I'm quite fond of how he speaks.”

The front two guards turned, just in time to see the two men behind them slide to the ground and an enormous black haired devil dusting his hands.

“What?” Shiao asked innocently as they immediately raised their weapons, but the distraction was enough for Iason and Riki to dispatch them as well.

“Shiao!” Guy hopped over the bodies of the fallen guards towards the Onyx, then suddenly stopped a hair's breath away from the android. What the hell had he been about to do? He flushed and stepped back almost tripping over the man behind him, but Shiao caught his arm and steadied him.

“Did you think I had abandoned you?”

Guy flushed and shook his head. “No! I...” He was just so glad to see him. “I'm just surprised to see you inside the castle.”

“I have been in and out of this palace multiple times already, their security is atrocious.” Shiao winked then turned his attention to the others. “I see you found your pet, Iason.”

“Fuck off,” Riki retorted.

“How did you know it was him?” Guy asked, he had been completely fooled by the dress.

“I can see no other reason for Iason to be accompanying anyone else. What I do not understand is why you are back here and not headed for the ship.”

“Change of plans,” Guy supplied. “Riki says the King's fucked up and needs to be stopped. Also he remembers his Mom, that Queen chick, so he wants to make sure she's okay.”

“Iason, you allowed him to return for such a trivial reason? After all we have done to get him away from here?”

Riki stepped forward. “I don't have to explain myself to you. If you want to leave, then go. No one's stopping you.”



Shiao lifted an eyebrow. While he was not considered an Elite in the same sense that Iason was, he was still a child of Jupiter and he had rarely experienced anyone speaking to him in such a way. Fear of him usually kept their manners in check. Was this what had attracted Iason to the brash young mongrel? Intriguing.

Shiao offered a low, slightly mocking bow. "As you wish, *Maku*."

"Fuck off with that shit!" Riki felt Iason's hand on his shoulder and heard a small chuckle.

"You asked for that, pet," the Blondie murmured, and watched Riki's eyes flare at the familiar term, but Iason wouldn't apologize for it. He was allowed the occasional slip, especially in front of others, and Riki was misbehaving, so it didn't hurt him to be reminded that regardless of their personal relationship, in effect he still belonged to a Blondie.

"If you're here then you should be able to sneak us in..." Guy began and Shiao held up a hand.

"Why must we sneak at all?" Everyone stared at him, confused. "Riki is a Prince. If he wishes to return to the lion's den as it were, albeit foolishly, then he should use the title to his advantage."

Riki glared at the Onyx and crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you talking about?"

"As a Prince, is there really anyone who will challenge you if you demand to see the King or Queen?"

"No...I'm not....I'm just a mongrel! How could I...?"

Iason, who had been listening to Shiao intently realized that the Onyx made sense, though he didn't feel good about it. "Here they believe you to be more, so use it Riki," he suggested. "You wish to see that the Queen is safe and also to confront the King. I do not agree with either, but if this is your wish then you must be the one to make it happen."

“It should work,” Shiao encouraged. “If you consider all they have done to keep you here and force you to accept your role, it would be detrimental to them to deny that role if you choose to embrace it.”

“They're right, man,” Guy offered. “You're really the only one who can do this. If we go charging in we'll all just get shot.”

Riki didn't want anyone else to get hurt, but how could he possibly pretend to be a Prince? He turned to Carrie, his last hope, who he assumed would be against such a farce but she just smiled and gave him a little curtsy.

“For Fuck's sake!”

Iason cupped Riki's cheek, stared into those stormy eyes and saw the fear there. “You already have the main ingredient for royalty,” he whispered into Riki's ear. “That damnable pride of yours.”

Riki stared into Iason's ice blue eyes and felt himself melt beneath them. Why hadn't he just escaped? He and Iason could be half way back to Amoï by now, but no, he had to be stupid and let a moment of emotional impulse put them all in a tight spot. Now he was the only one who could get them out of it.

He turned and looked at them all again, then tightened his jaw. “Fine. Fine, but I need to be in something other than a dress to do this.”

Guy grinned. “Gotcha covered,” he assured and darted off.

“Wait! Where...?” But Guy had already disappeared around a corner. “And...he's gone.”

“Hopefully he'll stay gone,” Iason muttered and Riki glared up at him.

“Don't start,” he warned, remembering the incident back on the road. “I've got a bone to pick with you already.”

Iason peered down at him, curiously. “Oh? About what, exactly?”

“Don't you have something for me?”

“I have many things for you, but you insist that I not molest you in public.”

“A letter?” Riki reminded, coldly. “Don't you have a letter for me, Iason?”

Iason's eyes flashed white for a fraction of a second and he blithely straightened the armored tunic he wore.

“Perhaps,” he returned, just as coldly. “If you behave.”

“Behave?” Riki ground out, furious. “You son of a...”

“I suggest we move to a less open area if we are going to continue this conversation,” Shiao said. “Where we can keep watch for Guy's return.”

Riki looked up at the Onyx. “Who the hell are you supposed to be anyway?”

“No one of significance,” Shiao assured. “Come, I know a place we can wait where we won't be disturbed.” He reached down and picked up two of the guards. “We should clean up our mess so as not to leave any trace of our plan.”

Iason hefted the other two. “Agreed.”

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Raoul entered Iason's condo through the inefficient doorway he had installed because his precious pet did not like the portals, and glanced around. “Cal?” he called, annoyed that someone had not come to greet him. What was the new Furniture's name? Beep? Butt? “Bean?”

A second later, Bean appeared. “Master Raoul. Master Iason is not in, Sir. Would you care to leave him a message?”

“Where is Cal?”

“I have not seen him, Sir.”

“Oh?” That was odd. He told Cal to return here, and he had no doubts that the boy had done just that. Cal had always been a perfect Furniture when it came to obedience. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, Sir. Shall I dispatch someone to locate him for you?”

Raoul's eyes narrowed on the boy, he could hear, even from this distance, the difference in the child's heart rate, though Bean's expression did not change. “You're lying.”

Bean blinked, startled. “Why would I lie?”

“Why indeed.” Raoul crossed the living area and started up the...ugg how tedious...steps to the upper floors. He searched each room and found no sign of Cal. “Where is he, Bean?” He demanded, descending to the main floor grabbing the Furniture up by the front of his jacket. “If you tell me now I will reconsider having your mind wiped for lying to an Elite!”

“I am not lying! He isn't here!”

“He *was* here, now where is he? Tell me or would you prefer this discussion be held in my laboratory?”

Bean paled and started to shake. “He...He doesn't belong here anymore! I'm the Furniture here now! This is my house to run. Master Iason left the task to me and me alone!”

Raoul threw him across the room, watched him bounce off the wall with a cry and slowly slide down it. “Do you know what the penalty is for a Furniture disobeying his master?”

“I have not disobeyed Master Iason! I would never... urrk!”

Raoul grabbed Bean by the throat. “I am at the end of my patience after a very trying day. You have one more opportunity to speak the truth before I take you away and strap you to one of my tables.”

“R....Ranaya Ugo.”

Raoul paused. “What? Why would he be there? Cal is a Furniture not a...”  
Raoul's eyes widener in shock. “What have you done?”

“I...I had them come for him. I...I told them Master Iason had no further use for him a...and dressed him in the pet's old clothes.”

“Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“This is my house! I'm the Furniture here! Master Iason chose me!”

“You stupid fool!” Raoul released him with distaste and reached for his com. “Do you realize what Iason will do to you when he learns of this?”

Bean curled up and sobbed. “I...I just wanted to serve my Master. I wanted to stay by his side and do whatever he needed me to do, but Cal kept getting in the way. He likes Cal better, he kept letting Cal do my work and that can't happen!”

Raoul shook his head and stepped away from the distraught boy. “My lab would have been the better option for you,” he stated as he headed for the door and placed a call.

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Katze glanced at his watch and scowled. Something must have happened; they should have been here by now. He had watched with trepidation as a garrison of guards appeared on the flight platforms and he heard the announcement that all flights were cancelled until further notice; there would be no incoming or outgoing traffic by order of the King.

That had to mean that Iason had gotten Riki away from the palace and were on the way, but what was taking them so long? Had they been captured? No, if they had the no flight order would have been lifted. But something had happened, that was obvious.

He couldn't just sit here and wait for them. The healing salve he had applied to his leg had helped numb the pain, so he could walk on it now, though it was not easy. Still, if Iason was in trouble it was his duty to help. Iason had told him to stay here and wait for them, so how could he go against a direct order? What if he left and they came and he was not there? What if they never came and he sat here doing nothing, while they were injured or imprisoned?

"Damn it," he growled and fired up his engines. Almost immediately, a warning sounded and a voice came over his com system.

"Pilot of craft on platform 23 shut down your engines. There is a no fly warning in effect."

"I'm not leaving, I just need to test out my thrusters as I recently replaced them," Katze lied smoothly. "Please allow me five minutes to hover so I can ensure take off when it is allowed."

"You will shut down your engines at once or be fired upon."

Katze watched as several guards headed towards the ship and sighed. "Okay, let's do it the hard way then." He flipped all systems on even as he felt the vibration of landing clamps sliding into place. "Yeah, thought you'd have those."

"You have five seconds to shut down your engines or we will fire!"

Katze saw that the guards now had their guns trained towards his cockpit as well as a long cannon that rose from the flight tower. He raised shields and pushed a green button on the console, jets of hot acid sprang forth from a compartment on the underside of the ship, aimed at the landing gear. The acid hit the bindings and melted them almost instantly, creating a plume of green smoke to rise around the ship, skewering the local's vision as the ship shot upwards and then streaked across the sky. A volley of laser fire chased him but he easily maneuvered to avoid all but the cannon blast, which hit the ship broadside and probably would have blasted him to bits, had the shields not held.

“I’m coming, Iason,” he said as he engaged the thrust and left the platform well behind him, shooting beyond firing range and out over the sea.

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The King started to pace inside his alcove, it was less than an hour to midnight. In the light of the Queen’s death and the new Prince’s disappearance the Festival had been cancelled, but for him time was running out. How could they still not have found three foreigners on their own land? Granted there were many races here for the festival, but none of them were a six-something, blond android or the dancing girl who looked like part feline!

He’d had the collected bodies of the recently departed brought to the secret cellar beneath this room, and he would have to go to prepare them or the meat would be wasted, but if he did not find the Prince soon his very life would be forfeit. So many years he had wasted here, so many years looking for the power that could save his people and now it was slipping through his fingers!

Glancing down at his hands, he saw that the skin was starting to peel, revealing the pale, ice blue flesh beneath. No! He just needed more time, he only had to have the Prince for a few moments and that would be all it would take to save him from this indignity.

Stalking over to a small emergency wardrobe, he selected a pair of black gloves and pulled them over his hands to hide the slow decay beneath. A knock came at the door.

“Come.”

The Hand of the King appeared, dressed in his usual robes, and bowed slightly. “Forgive the intrusion, Sarum, there is a matter that requires your urgent attention.”

“What could possibly be more important than finding the Prince?”  
Nathanial snapped.

“A communication from a ship currently in orbit, my lord. It is the ruler of Amoï and it is looking for the Prince and the android.”

“Another machine?”

“Yes.”

“Deny all knowledge...”

“We did try that of course, however they are threatening to fire upon us if you do not speak directly with them.”

“Then raise our force shields!”

“Sarum, we have scanned their vessel, our shields would not hold up against more than two of their attacks.”

The King growled frustrated. He didn’t need this! Why was the Prince so damn important to everyone? Was he not just a kept pet for a Blondie? How did he warrant such champions?

“Fine.”

He strode out to the throne room and took his place on the throne, noticing they had brought a communique disc in and set the small circular object on the floor a few feet from him. He nodded and almost immediately, the image of a cybernetic God appeared. The form was neither male nor female, looked neither Human or alien. It was unique in its form and figure, and multi coloured in no sense of pattern.

“You are the ruler of this world?” the strange voice demanded.

“I am the King yes. Why do you come here and threaten our people with violence?”

“I am Jupiter. You will return what is mine.”



“Ah, so this is the creator of monsters?” He smirked at the man next to him.  
“The leader of a race of machines bent on enslaving humans?”

“My purpose is beyond your comprehension. Return what you have taken.”

“And what is it you believe to be yours?”

“You have in your possession citizens of Amoï. You will release them.”

“We are currently holding an annual festival, we have several species here for the celebration. Why do you not contact your citizens and request that they return?”

“They did not come here willingly. You stole them from me.”

The King smirked. “What a ridiculous charge! Stole them? Are they people or cattle? If you cannot keep track of your...”

“YOU STOLE THEM FROM ME!”

The King and all the other guards present were stunned speechless, for the voice of petulant rage did not echo only in the magnificent hall, but also inside their very minds, as the alien form before them burst into such an array of ferocious colour they were nearly blinded.

The figure reformed and continued the voice once again emotionless.  
“Return them or you will be destroyed.”

The King, rattled by the experience, fought hard not to appear he was upset.  
“Perhaps if you could give us the names of these people I can send some of my men to look for them.”

The hologram remained silent, and the King found that more disturbing than the being’s previous outburst.

“You desire death. It is decided.”

A moment later, the entire palace shuddered and alarm claxons sounded.

“Wait!” the King urged. “You cannot destroy us! We are a peaceful planet!”

“I care not for your politics. Return what is mine, or die.”

“If you destroy us you will destroy them also!”

The hologram flickered. “You admit your crime.”

The King watched some of the guards look at him in shock and had to bite down on his desire to kill every, last one of them. He did not care what they thought, they would still obey him because he was the King.

“You may have back the android, we never intended him to come here, but the boy is mine. He is my son. We did not steal him, he is ours and belongs here. We were bringing him home and...”

“The boy belongs to Iason.”

The King rose imposingly from his throne. “He will *not* remain enslaved to a machine. He is my son and a Prince. I will compensate your android for the loss, but the boy will stay here with his family.”

“His family is Iason.”

“You are being unreasonable! Why must you take him away from his parents? A loving father and mother?”

“I will be his parent.”

The King was aghast at the idea. “You can’t be serious! You are a machine!”

“I am Jupiter. I surpassed the limits of machine centuries ago. I am superior to all other races. You cannot begin to appreciate what I am.”

The King desperately tried to figure out a way to resolve this dilemma. He couldn’t give up the Prince, but nor could he waste further time bandying with a machine! “They are not in the palace,” he admitted. “We have been

looking for them as well. Give us some time to find them and then we will turn them over to you.”

If he could get the Prince before midnight then he would leave this place and Jupiter could destroy it all it wanted, he cared not for the people of this planet. If he did not find the Prince within that time frame, his life would be over regardless.

“You have thirty minutes.”

Jupiter’s hologram dissipated and the King breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to the guards.

“Find them, leave no stone unturned. It is now the very safety of our people that are at risk!”

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Guy had somehow managed to find Riki his original clothes, the mongrel quickly dressed then the party headed further into the castle. They had only managed to go a short distance when they spotted Leila being escorted down the hallway and gasped at the visible injuries. Before anyone could stop Riki he hurried over to them.

“What the hell?”

The guards stumbled to a halt, their weapons half raised, then quickly lowering again as they lightly bent their heads. One of them spoke.

“Maku! You have escaped. The King...”

Riki ignored them and caught Leila's arm. “What happened?”

She lowered her eyes from his. “Do not look at me, I beg of you.”

“Who did this?” he demanded as Iason and the others appeared behind them, no longer in their disguises, but in their true forms.

“Maku!” The guards again raised their weapons, but Riki stepped in the range of their fire. “The intruders must be dealt with! The King’s orders!”

Riki’s instinct was to fight, but he caught Shiao’s eye and remembered what the Onyx and suggested, as well as what Iason had called his damnable pride. He straightened his shoulders and pulled back the memories of being the leader of Bison. “They are my...guests.”

“Maku...”

Riki grabbed the guard’s weapon so fast the man did not have time to react and tossed it backwards to Iason. “Are you seriously contradicting me right now?”

The guard blinked nervously and glanced at his fellow officers. “We have orders from the King, my lord. It is our duty...”

“The King does not understand the situation,” Shiao advised. “He believes that we have attempted to injure the Prince, but as you can see he is unharmed.”

The guards battled confusion and the urge to properly do their duty.

“Where are you taking this woman?”

Iason asked, indicating Leila, the guards ignored him, until their Prince stepped into the personal space of one of them.

“He asked you a question. Answer him.”

“The disintegration chamber,” the guard replied reluctantly. “By order of the King, she is to be executed for treason.”

“Treason?” Riki growled, then glanced at Iason, because he had no idea what that meant.

To allow Riki to save face as the Prince, Iason replied to the guards instead of his lover. “How can she have been convicted of crimes against the monarchy?”

Riki’s gaze turned back to the guards, and both of the men physically stepped back from the death like pits of black that stared back at them. “Because she let me escape?” he asked the guards in a voice so low and dangerous that one of them actually shivered. “You’re going to kill her for doing what I *asked* her to do? Is *that* what you’re saying?”

“M...Maku...it is the King’s order! He believes that you are in danger and...and...”

“I don’t think the one in danger right now is the Prince,” Shiao offered quietly, his statement causing one of the guards to shoot him a quick look of panic before it was quickly masked. “So by your reasoning the Prince has the right to execute you for doing what the King has ordered?”

Both guards backed up just as the Captain of the guard arrived.

“What is happening here?” He spotted Riki and the others, but choose to use his diplomacy training rather than immediately strike a battle. “Maku, we are relieved to find you returned and in good health. The King will be most relieved, I will take you too him.”

Riki glared at him, trying to ascertain the Captain’s angle, then he turned to the two guards. “Take Yiela back to..ah...”

“Your chambers, Maku?” Iason offered kindly.

“Yeah, there. If anyone hurts her they die.”

The guards glanced at their Captain who nodded. They took Leila by the arms again, gently this time, and started away.

“Guy, Carrie, go with them. Make sure no one hurts her.”

“Will do,” Guy assured and he and Carrie followed the two guards.

The Captain of the Guard watched the five of them walk away then turned his attention to Riki again. "I will have rooms made up for your guests."

"They're coming with me," Riki returned as he glanced back at the two Elites. "Or do you think you can stop them?"

Both of the androids towered over the Captain, and while he could possibly stun one of them, he knew the other would be on him in an instant, not to mention that the Prince might get injured in the cross fire. No, it was better to pick his battles.

"As you wish." He turned on his heel. "If you will follow me?"  
"Where is the Queen?" Riki asked.

"The Queen is...cannot be disturbed at this time."

"I want to see her first."

"Regrettably that is not possible."

Riki stopped walking. "Take me to her first, then I'll go see the King and all of this will be done with."

The Captain turned to meet the Prince's gaze, saw the determination there. "My orders are to take you to the King first, Maku."

"My orders..." Riki began but the Captain interrupted him.

"You are my Prince, but he is my *King*, I must put his commands before all others."

Riki wasn't ready to see the King yet, but it appeared he would have no choice.

"Take us to the Queen," Shiao suggested. "The Prince wishes to see that she is well, and we can assure him of that."

"I am not leaving Riki," Iason refused, but watched Riki nod.

“Go with him,” he requested quietly. “I need you to do this for me.”

“Riki.”

“Please, Iason. You can come find me right after.”

Iason was not pleased. He was unwilling to let Riki out of his sight again, especially had he had no idea what the King had in plan for his lover. “Very well, however, if anyone attempts to stop me from reaching you again I will destroy this place.”

Riki glanced at the Captain. “He means it, so don’t fuck around.”

The Captain nodded, called a servant over and whispered something to him.

“What are you telling him?”

“To take your guests to the Queen, of course.”

“Is the Queen with the guard’s garrison then?” Iason asked, his keen hearing picking up every word.

The Captain started to refute the claim, but Riki had already punched him and knocked him cold.

“Screw this. Shiao, find my...the Queen. Iason, you come with me and we’ll go see the man who claims to be King.”

“As you wish, Maku,” Iason smirked and watched Riki glare at him

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Raoul found Cal in one of the back rooms being assaulted by three men. They wasted no time here when it came to fresh meat. He stepped inside, grabbed the one thrusting himself into Cal by the hair and tossed him into

the nearest wall. There was a cracking sound of the man's neck breaking and the other men quickly backed off seeing an actual Blondie in their midst. Elites never came here!

“Cal? Answer me boy!”

Cal's eyes were glazed over, either from shock or whatever drugs they might have given him. He gathered the soiled sheet around the young man and lifted him into his arms.

“I'm taking you out of here.”

Cal's mouth tried to work but no words came out and when they did, it made no sense.

“What was that?” Raoul asked putting his ear closer to the Furniture's mouth as they strode through the corridor and into the elevator that would bring them topside. No one dared to stop him.

“Sh...she...ets,” Cal whispered. “To...I..have to...clean...she...ts.”

“Oh child,” Raoul sighed. No doubt Cal was in pain and humiliated and yet he was still thinking like a Furniture. He could not fathom what it must have been like for a Eunic who could feel no pleasure to be raped so viciously. He momentarily considered the experiments he had wanted to try with Katze and immediately purged such ideas from his mind for future. “You do not have to clean any sheets this day.”

As if suddenly realizing where he was and what was happening, Cal started to struggle. “No! Leave me! Leave me!”

Raoul's hold tightened. “I will not leave you in this filthy place. Calm down!”

Cal stilled and lay against Raoul's chest. “D...don't tell...Master. Don't tell them.”

“Cal I must.” Raoul stepped out of the elevator into the open air and headed for his car. “Bean must be punished...”



“Please.”

Raoul carefully settled Cal in the passenger side of the car, then as an afterthought pulled away the soiled sheet and wrapped the boy in his coat instead. “There now, that's better, isn't it?”

“I...I'm dirty.”

“It's fine.” Raoul tossed the sheet away in disgust then climbed behind the wheel. “I shall take you home and...”

“No! Please! Not...like this. Please!”

Raoul stared at the boy, frustrated, then realized that Cal had always been exemplary in his manner and appearance. While normally Furniture and Pets were taught not to feel shame, this was not a normal situation. He supposed that even after such an attack, Cal might be feeling out of sorts. He was still just a Human after all.

“Very well. I shall take you to my home and get you cleaned up.”

It was nearly a two hour journey back to Eos, even with his flight car on maximum speed. The trip had been a quiet one, Cal remained as silent and as still as the grave, not making a single sound aside from breathing, that Raoul could detect, even with his keen hearing.

He parked in the designated lot just outside the main gates and stepped out, intending to round to the other side and lift Cal out, but the young man had already pushed his door up and slid his bare feet to the hard cold flooring. Cal had managed to slide his arms into the sleeves of Raoul's coat and had rolled them while they were driving and as he stepped out the coat fell to just above his ankles, and exposing his bare feet.

Unwilling to press the matter, Raoul walked over to the nearest portal and waited for Cal, who was moving much slower, to catch up. He caught Cal's hand so they would share their destination and a moment later they appeared in Raoul's apartment. The Blondie strode a few steps to a secondary, secured portal and they stepped out into his lab.

“Get on the table, I wish to examine you.”

Cal silently obeyed, pulling off the coat, carefully draping it over a nearby chair and then carefully edging himself onto a lab table. He lay back and waited.

Raoul’s examination was quick but thorough, his touch brief but necessary. “Nothing broken, you do have some tearing in your anus and the bruising can be remedied. I noticed you were limping, is it because of the pain or is your right leg injured?”

“I fell....trying to run, Sir. I believe I may have twisted my ankle.”

Raoul examined the foot, noticed some swelling. “Yes, a sprain. That too can be taken care of.” He stepped back. “Come with me.”

Cal slowly slid off the table and followed, keeping his head down as Raoul led him to what appeared to be a wash area off in a side room. There was a sunken tub, a shower stall, a sink and a commode, and another stall with silver tubed glass, he wasn’t sure what it was for.

Raoul stepped forward, opened the tube and taped a few buttons on the panel. “This will disinfect you and sterilize your open wounds. Step inside, close your eyes and mouth and hold your breath.”

Cal did as he was told. The cylinder closed but he could still see Raoul’s form on the other side. A low humming noise startled him a little, then there was a whoosh of sting luke-warm spray. It was over almost immediately, but he found the few cuts that the men had made with their knives now throbbed painfully.

Raoul opened the tube and helped Cal stumble out. “Take a bath or a shower, whichever is easier for you and scrub yourself as best you can. I will find some clothes for you.”

The Blondie did not stay to watch the boy bathe, he knew that Cal would obey. Cal had not cried, once over his ordeal. Initially he had been

disoriented and pleaded not to be taken home in the state he was in, but he had not cried.

The injuries on the Furniture were apparent. His lip was split, he had bruising that looked like fingers around his arms, legs and throat. Dried blood had streaked the inside of his legs. Cal stepped inside the shower, put it as hot as he could stand it and tried to wash it all away, letting the water turn brown then red, then clear again as he viciously scrubbed at his skin.

Raoul thought considering his injuries.

Only when Raoul returned did Cal order the water stopped and stepped out to dry himself. Raoul stepped forward with the antibiotic cream that he'd had his own Furniture fetch.

“Turn to the wall,” he ordered quietly and only then did he witness a slight tremble before Cal obeyed. “I will try not to hurt you.”

Cal braced his hands on the tiled wall and spread his legs as Raoul applied the cream around and inside his anus. It hurt, but he worked hard not to flinch, and when Raoul was done, Cal felt a heavy, heated robe drop around him.

“You should rest. I will call the physician...”

“If you have the medication I can dispense it myself, sir.”

Raoul stared down at this impossibly brave child, and nodded in approval. He brought call to another adjacent alcove which appeared to serve as a spare bedroom. “Go to the bed I will have it brought to you.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Cal slid his arms through the robe and knotted it, then walked across the luxurious bathroom out into the even more elaborate bedroom and climbed the platform to the bed. He sat primly on the edge of the mattress, winced, but remained sitting.

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Shaio stood against the wall of the memorial chamber and stared at the woman lying at the front. None of the handmaidens noticed him, he had developed the ability of camouflage, to allow his body to flow into the colours of his surroundings and this was how he could so easily move about the palace. He learned this skill decades after he had escaped Jupiter's wrath, and he had no idea if the others like him had the same skill, for they had all been destroyed.

When he had returned to Jupiter to assist in creating Iason, he did not ask about this strange power, for fear his creator might deem him a threat again. However, now he had seen Iason use a version of the same skill, in camouflaging himself to look like another person entirely, therefore Jupiter must have been aware of it and refined it for the Blondie. Perhaps that was why he had been tasked with participating in the Iason's creation, because he was unique.

He felt a moment of regret for the beautiful woman on the pedestal, he knew that the mongrel who had just found his mother had now lost her again. She had seemed sincere in her dealings with Iason's pet, and it was always regrettable when such admirable Humans had their lives ended too soon. A memory of Terian's innocent face flickered in his mind and he sighed. Yes, sometimes living as long as he had was more a curse than a gift.

Quietly making his way out of the chamber he remained close to the walls as he made his way to the throne room. He would have to tell Riki that the Queen was dead, and then they would see where the mongrel stood on his Prince hood. He had the layout of the palace memorized now, as he stealthily made his way to his destination, just as another thought entered his mind.

Guy. Was the young mongrel well? Had they made it to Riki's chambers safely or had the guards tried something foolish? Guy was headstrong, so if the guards did deviate from taking Yielia to the Prince's rooms he had no doubt that Guy would have thrown himself at them in challenge. Such a stubborn, impulsive Human, and yet, that was what he liked most about

Guy; every day was unique and interesting. He would have to say goodbye to Guy one day as he had with Terian and that thought filled him with a strange sensation that he had not felt in over a century, the stark, brutal feeling of loneliness.

Logically he should report to Iason and Riki right away, but his mind would not let go of the idea that Guy might be injured and so he changed his course and headed for the Prince's chambers.

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Iason reached for Riki as the palace grounds shook beneath their feet, and held onto him until the shuddering stopped.

“What was that?” Riki demanded worried.

“I am unsure, but it felt and sounded like an ionized cannon blast.”

“Do they have those here?”

“I do not believe so.”

“Then how...?”

Iason caught Riki's hand and started to run. “We must hurry.”

“Why? What's happening?”

“We are under attack by forces from Amoï.”

“What!” Riki was so shocked he stopped running. “How? Who?”

“Jupiter. She is here.”

Even now Iason could feel her consciousness searching for him and it took much of his energy to avoid the connection. Jupiter would demand their immediate return, and he had no doubt she would destroy this planet if he did not. He promised to give Riki a chance with these people and to discover the truth about the King, so he would have to stall Jupiter awhile longer.

They arrived at the throne room but there was about a dozen guards outside of it, who immediately stepped forward, with their weapons raised.

Iason dispatched the first two guards within the blink of an eye, gripping their heads together with his large hands and smashing their skulls into each other, rendering them unconscious, and possibly dead from the force. Three other guards attacked, one he grabbed by the throat and snapped his neck, while kicking back the other two, then when the two he had repelled lunged for him he hit them both in the left upper chest, shattering their plate armor and stopping their hearts instantly.

Riki's eyes widened as he watched the Blondie rip through men like they were paper dolls and he realized he had never really seen Iason in battle. He knew the Blondie was strong, impossibly so, but this...this was a massacre. He started to say something for Iason to not kill everyone in range when he caught a blow to the back of the head. He stumbled but did not fall, and he quickly spun around to disarm the guard who had hit him in the back of the head with his weapon. Another one came at him and he delivered a flying kick that sent the man back against the wall. He landed on his feet, just as Iason tossed the final guard aside.

The corridor was like a war zone, strewn with the bodies of the dead or badly injured, and Riki realized that Iason was talking to him.

“Come, Riki.”

Despite having just witnessed the monster that lurked inside the Blondie, Riki did not even hesitate to put his hand in Iason's as he stepped over a body. They pushed through the doors of the throne room and found another garrison of guards standing at the ready between them and the King who was standing by his throne.

“Ciel! Thank Arthur you are well!”

Riki’s eyes narrowed as the guards stepped aside in unison and opened a gap to the throne. “Surprised?”

“Relieved!” The King assured smiling. “We had feared the worst when you disappeared.”

Riki started forward through the rows of guards and felt the presence of Iason directly behind him. “Why am I so important to you?” Riki demanded. “Why did you bring me here?”

“You are my son, why would I not?”

“It’s more than that!” Riki snapped as he paused at the stairs leading up to the throne. “You were going to execute a woman just for helping me? A real King would never do that.”

The King’s expression flickered and his smile faded. “You have no idea what it takes to be King, Ciel, you know only how to obey quietly as you are violated, isn’t that true?”

Riki’s hands curled into fists at his side. “I’ve never pretended to be something I’m not,” he retorted coldly. “Not like you. Pretending to be King, pretending to care about me, but you’re just a fraud!”

There was a mild murmur among the guards, which immediately quieted as the King raised his head regally and stared at them.

“I am your father, you will not speak...”

“My father is dead! I watched him *die*! You tried to make me forget, but I didn’t! I remember it all! Every last detail of that day, and do you know what I saw? I saw a fucking alien gut and eat your insides. You are *not* my father and you are not the King!”

Nathaniel’s eyes flickered again and Iason realized that the man was not blinking, it was the almost indistinct appearance of an inner eyelid. This being was not Human at all, he was...he was...

“Riki get away from him!” Iason cried and surged forward, but the King was faster and with impossible speed he flew down the stairs, wrapped Riki up in his cloak and the pair vanished in a puff of smoke.

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“Guy!”

The mongrel turned as Shiao burst through the doors of the Prince’s chambers, having already dispatched the two guards outside.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“You are not injured?” Shiao demanded as he took note of the two women seated on one of the cushioned benches by the window. What was wrong with him? What had made him so sick with worry? Was he still feeling Iason’s chaotic emotions?

“No. Carrie’s taking care of Yiel, and I’m fine. What happened?”

Shiao realized he needed a valid reason to have deviated from the plan, but found he had none. Instead he said, “The Queen is dead.”

Carrie gasped as she thought of how upset Riki would be. “How?”

“The King claims it was you,” Yiel stated quietly. When you kidnapped the Prince.”

“I didn’t kidnap him and I sure as hell didn’t kill anyone!”

“I believe that it was the King himself,” Yiel continued quietly, staring at her folded hands. “He has not been himself of late and he tried to control Maku through mind control. The King that I served as child would never have done that.”

“Riki doesn’t think the King is real either. He thinks it’s an imposter,” Guy said.



“It is possible, he was...changed from when he returned after Maku was lost, however he was our King and no one could go against him.”

“Riki will.” Guy turned to Shiao. “And we have to help him.”

“What about the women?” Shiao asked.

“We’ll be fine,” Carrie assured. “I can handle anything that comes our way, Riki needs you more.”

Both men nodded and hurried out. Carrie rose and stared at the doors. “Is there some way to lock this from the inside?”

“Of course,” she assured, rose and limped to the side of the door. She touched a panel there and a field of light shimmered over the doors, then disappeared. “No one may enter now without the proper synergy.”

“And who would have this synergy?”

“Only the King and...” Yielia lowered her head again. “The Queen.”

“Good.” Carrie took the young woman’s hands and led her back to the bench. “Let’s finish dressing these wounds.”

“Thank you. You are kind, for an off-worlder. It is no wonder Maku choose you over we, who wished only to contain and confuse him.”

“Yeah, well, unfortunately Riki is used to that.”

Guy and Shiao made it to the hall almost without incident, if you didn’t count the bodies of the guards they had knocked out and hidden in various rooms or alcoves on their way. They saw the throne room doors open and could hear the sounds of battle coming from inside, and could see a partially obscured view of the scene.

Iason was surrounded by about twenty or thirty guards, many more littered the grand marble floor around them. The Blondie moved with such speed and precision that the guards could not get a proper shot at them with their blasters, and he was mowing them down like grass that had grown too high.

As another garrison of armored men entered the throne room, Shiao and Guy moved in to fight.

“The King has taken Riki!” Iason called as he snapped the neck of one guard while he stood on the throat of another. “

“Go!” Shiao returned as he dispatched two of the guards closest to him. “There is a secret passage beneath the throne, it opens by a trap door at the side of the stairs.”

“Can you handle this?” Iason asked, although he was already moving towards the throne.

“Yes, go!”

Iason did not wait to hear anything further. He found the mechanism and entered a dark tunnel moments later. The entrance slid closed and encased him in darkness, but Iason did not require light to see. Blue beams shot from his eyes and he followed the path, desperate to find Riki.

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“Jupiter.”

Jupiter was silent, for she was concentrating on reaching Iason. She could feel the outer layers of his mind, but he was blocking her. Why? Why would he be blocking her? He was aware of her presence, and yet she could sense his thoughts were scattered, desperate. It was impossible for her to tell more than that and she found this frustrating.

“Jupiter.”

Her hologram appeared as the Captain repeated her name a second time. “What is it?”

“The Vliphehshie have raised shields and have started towards us.”

“I see.” Her ship was more than capable of dealing with the handful of ships coming towards them. She knew that the Captain would have already raised their shields and readied the weapons to fire.

“Do you believe they are trying to prevent us from rescuing Iason and the pet?”

“No. They are a concurring race, yet they have remained silent and still until this moment. Something is happening on the surface that they have been waiting for.”

“The geometric and astrological sensors show no special significance.”

“No. The Vliphehshie are an unnatural race, so it would be logical that what they seek will not be found in the natural occurring anomalies.”

She could not reach Iason, perhaps she would try the Onyx. Almost immediately, she connected with him, and his thoughts explained the situation. “The King is the key,” she decided. “There is insufficient data to hypothesize.”

“Captain! Sensors indicate two hundred ships have just warped in.”

“Call the fleet,” Jupiter ordered and turned to the view screen. “It seems we have been caught in the middle of an invasion.”

## Chapter 33

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carrie joins the battle, Katze makes an appearance, Iason gets pissed, Jupiter is...well, Jupiter and Riki is having a really bad day...yeah that about does it.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Le Sigh. So...I had intended to make this the final chapter and tie everything up in a quick, but neat little bow, and then elaborate more in the sequel, but all of you have been so supportive and so incredibly, fabulously patient in waiting for my updates I decided that wasn't fair so I added a lot more to it. This means of course that this is NOT the final chapter and that there will be at least one more. Honestly, this story will be the death of me, but...as long as you are all enjoying it, I shall carry on. :-) Please, please review, so I know that I made the right decision.

Carrie finished dressing Yiel's injuries as well as she could and the woman thanked her. As yet no one had come to the Prince's chamber, but that didn't mean they wouldn't. While she had agreed to stay there, she didn't think it would be safe. Not only that, but she had no idea what was going on with Riki and Iason. Had they found the King? Had they managed to reason with him or were they even now lying dead somewhere?

She rose and glanced out the patio doors. For anyone else it would have been far too dark to see very much beyond the balcony, due to the pitch dark of the evening, but with her feline eyes she could make everything out perfectly. If they needed to escape, she would be able to get to the tree without a problem.

Glancing back at Yiel she realized that the young woman might be in rough shape to try the route she and Riki had taken just a few hours ago. Looking at the door again, she thought it actually quite odd that no one had come to this chamber. What exactly was going outside this room?

Growling low in her throat she walked to the doors and searched for the panel that would unlock them.

“What are you doing?” Yielā demanded, surprised.

“It’s too quiet,” Carrie replied, finally finding the right switch and removing the security on the door. “It feels wrong.”

Yielā rose and stumbled towards her. “The Prince insisted we remain here. Your own companions...”

“They aren’t my companions, I have no allegiance towards those men.” She opened the door and carefully peeked outside, the corridor was completely deserted. Yes, something was very, very wrong. She glanced back at Yielā. “Are you coming?”

Yielā hesitated only for a moment before she moved to the door and followed Carrie out. “Why must you do this? Why can you not wait as we were ordered to do?”

“Because I don’t like waiting, especially when I don’t know the situation or what exactly I’m waiting for.”

“It was safer back in the chamber! Out here we could be...”

Carrie stopped suddenly and turned to the younger woman. “Whether it’s in an open field or a locked box, a sitting duck is still a sitting duck. My friends could be hurt, Riki could be hurt, and there is no way I can just sit back and wait when they could be dying somewhere, also waiting.”

“We do not even know where they are! The guards may come upon us at any moment and arrest us. What good would we be to Maku then?”

“No I don’t think so.” Carrie turned down another corridor and started up a set of steps. “There are no guards, haven’t you noticed?”

Yielā glanced around, as if just understanding. “But...there should be.”

“Right. There should be. The place should be crawling with them. And if they’re not, that means they’ve been pulled away for something else.” Something like an enraged Blondie, perhaps? Were Iason and Riki being overrun by these damn people?

Yiela winced and hurried to catch up to Carrie who was nearly running as they hit the top of the stairs. “That does not change the fact that we do not know where they are!”

“I know where they are.”

“How is that possible?”

“I can smell them,”

Yiela’s eyes rounded. “I beg your pardon?” she demanded as they entered the corridor she knew led to the throne room, and yet here too there were no guards present. The strange female was correct, this was suspicious.

She was just about to ask another question when a voice whispered to her. Her eyes widened and she stopped dead in her tracks.

Carrie turned, noticing. “What’s wrong?”

Yiela closed her eyes tightly for several long seconds, and when she opened them again, they were fresh with unshed tears. “I...I must go.”

“What? Go where?” Carrie demanded but Yiela was already disappearing back the way she had come. “Well, what the hell?” Torn between going after the woman, because Riki has asked her to keep Yiela safe, and following her instincts would take her in the opposite direction, she growled low and deep in her throat.

Turning she started down the corridor in the opposite direction, headed for the throne room, Riki and Iason were her priority and if they were in trouble...Her keen hearing picked up the sound of battle less than a minute later and she broke into a run again. As she ran she began to change,

shedding her clothing and shifting to all fours as the beast inside of her flowed through.

In every direction were bodies both prone and moving, closing in and battling the two lone survivors in the middle of the fray. It wasn't Iason and Riki, and she considered for half of a second abandoning them and continuing her search, and while the guards had blasters, the chaos of bodies worked in their favor, the moment they got close enough to get a clear shot at the two prisoners, they were quickly put out of commission.

She turned away, she needed to find Iason and Riki, but then the Human, the one Riki had called Guy took a blaster hit to the back and dropped to the floor with a cry. The Onyx became more enraged and more guards were sent flying.

"Well, piss it," she decided, unable to leave them to it now, and with a ferocious growl jumped into the fray. She leapt over heads, shoulders and bodies, leaving a near fatal injury at everyone she touched as she made her way to the center. "Where are Iason and Riki?" She cried as she reached them, just as Shiao pulled Guy closer to him; the young man was injured, but still conscious.

"The King took the boy and Iason gave chase," Shiao stated as he tried to shield Guy from any other guards reaching him. "We agreed to hold these men off."

"There are too many!"

"There weren't this many when we made the agreement!"

Carrie's claws sliced through the stomach of a guard as he lunged at her, right through the armour and reaching the soft flesh beneath. She pulled her hand back and sniffed, then scowled. "These things aren't Human."

"I concur." For every time that Shiao had put one down they rose again, unless the blow was fatal. There seemed to be no stopping them. "The odds of us surviving this are less than zero, zero, zero, zero point two three percent."

Carrie suddenly shoved them down as a laser blast missed them by inches. “Never tell me the odds!” she barked as she located a fallen blaster and made a wide sweeping motion, toppling several of them men directly surrounding them. It did the job, but the second wave of guards simply crawled over their fallen comrades to reach them. “Cockroaches,” she decided. “I hate cockroaches.”

“Watch out!”

Carrie turned just as a guard was about to grab her, but Guy, from his current position on the floor, managed to trip the guy. Shiao caught the falling guard and swung him out over the crowd of men gathering around them, giving them breathing room for another few, paltry seconds.

“S...Shiao. We’re...not gonna get out of this, are we?” Guy winced. The blast had completely disabled his back, knocking out any and all control of his legs.

“No, I don’t think we will,” Shiao stated, crouching beside his friend,

“Then...I’m glad...we’ll go together.”

Shiao started to smile, when Carrie interrupted their solemn moment.

“Save the dramatics, kid. I’m not ready to die. Cover your ears, now!”

Confused, they both did as she demanded and a second later an impossibly loud shriek came from her mouth, echoing off the marbled halls and causing nearly all of their attackers to grab their heads in pain before they tumbled, like a badly stacked tray of dominoes, one by one top over top, to the floor.

“W...what was that?” Guy asked, dazed, even when his ears covered his head was throbbing his vision blurring.

“It bought us time, but only a few minutes,” she stated. “Is there another way out of here?”



Shiao glanced around and shook his head, the near sonic tone of her cry had rattled even his selected circuits. “We would have to walk through the bodies, and would probably not make it before the wake.”

“Well that’s just...”

The booming, familiar sound of thrusters came from above and the cathedral glass dome over the palace throne room suddenly burst inwards. They dropped and covered each other as debris shattered and fell around them and then a voice commanded.

“Don’t just lay there, grab on!”

Shiao was the first to rise and realize that a cable had been lowered from the hovering ship. “Katze!” he waved, pulled Guy up on his shoulder then grabbed the cable. Carrie latched on just as the ship started to rise and the guards below them began to regain consciousness.

“Where’s Iason?” Katze demanded the moment his passengers were on board his ship.

“Underground somewhere,” Shiao returned as he settled Guy in one of the two jumper seats. “Does this ship have medical facilities?”

“There’s a kit in the lower cabinet to your right,” Katze quickly swerved up and away from the, now air-conditioned throne room as the guards started firing at them.

Shiao retrieved the kit as Carrie settled into the co-pilot chair and smiled at him. “Hi, Katze, I’m...”

“Naked.” Katze retorted, grabbed the jacket he had draped across the back of his chair, and tossed it to her.

“What a gentleman.” Carrie slid her arms into the jacket and buttoned it up, her long razor sharp nails clicking off the metal. “I’m Carrie, a friend of...”

“I know who you are.”

Iason had asked Katze to investigate Carrie Emeline days ago, although he obviously had not looked deep enough, for there was nothing in her history to indicate she was a shape-shifter.

He adjusted their speed and heading then levelled off once they were well above the clouds. He activated a neostatic pulse so that the ship could not be tracked. "Where is Iason?"

Shiao, who had used a healing wand on Guy so the young man could at least stand, albeit shakily, stood behind the black market dealer. "The King has Riki and Iason went after him."

Katze nodded. "Right then." He slid his sleeve up and pressed a button on a very intricate looking watch.

"What's that?" Guy asked, as he winced and moved to stand beside Shiao. The wand had removed the paralyzing effects of the blaster, but it still hurt like hell.

"A tracking device."

"For Iason?"

"For Riki."

Guy scowled. "You fuckers can't leave him alone for a minute can you?"

"It might have been good to use that earlier," Shiao said, ignoring the mongrel's moment of temper.

"Iason told me to only use it in an absolute emergency, and we knew where Riki was before so it wasn't warranted."

The tiny red dot started to blink, showing them coordinates about a mile or so away.

"It's not right!" Guy insisted angrily as Katze adjusted their course. "You fucking people have taken everything from him, even his right to be alone!"

“Don't you talk to me about Riki's rights!” Katze snapped. “We're not the ones who castrated him, and tried to blow him up, then led him into the hands of a mad man who almost killed him a second time!”

Guy flushed angrily. “I never meant to hurt Riki! I was trying to save him! If Mink had just let him go then...”

“Riki has accepted that he belongs to Iason and Iason has made several allowances to....”

“Allowances? Is that what you call tagging him like a fucking dog so you can always find him?”

In a very rare moment of temper, Katze suddenly turned in his seat, reached back and grabbed Guy by the shirt front, pulling him almost head first into the piloting console. “The tracer is to protect Riki from people who want to hurt him, people like *you*. He agreed to it and he knows we will use it in a situation like this. Iason is his safety net, do you get that? *We* are the ones that protect him.”

When Shiao's huge hand stretched across Katze's, he glanced up at the cold, green eyes of an annoyed Onyx. He released Guy and shoved him back into the jumper seat. “I'm grateful for your help with my injury and for what you have done for Iason,” he said holding Shiao's gaze. “But put your hands on me again and I *will* end you.”

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Riki stumbled as the King shoved him into a small, darkened room, lit only by candlelight and with a stench that almost made him gag. Instinct had him covering his mouth and nose instead of steadying himself as he dropped to his knees.

In the center of the room, standing next to some sort of granite pedestal was a creature that Riki had never seen the like of before. The bottom half of it

looked Human, and wore the trousers and armor of one of the palace guards, but the upper half, near its face and torso, appeared as if the Human skin was peeled back and draped around its waist like a forgotten waistcoat.

In the place of flesh was a pale blue creature, with three, pitted black eyes in the center of its head, a caved in, skeletal nose, and a mouth gaping wide from where its neck should be. Talloned, bloodied hands lifted what looked like intestines from a corpse on the pedestal and slid it through razor sharp teeth to slurp the organs inside.

Riki cried out and scurried back against the wall as the alien, its mouth and fangs dripping with pieces of flesh and blood smiled at him, a terrifying smile.

“Leave us!” Nathaniel ordered and the creature growled in dissent, but a moment later it had finished its treat, licked it’s fingers and pulled the skin coat over itself; appearing once more with mahogany skin and a human face.

“W...what are you?” Riki asked, the majority of his bravado having fled in the face of such grotesque reality.”

“It matters not.” Nathaniel crouched before Riki as the guard left them alone and caressed Riki’s face. “Look at me, Ceil.”

Riki closed his eyes, tight, he knew that trick now and he wasn’t going to let his mind be taken over again. “No. Fuck you. Get the fuck away from me!” Riki shoved at the false King but the man barely moved from his crouched stance. A moment later he found himself being lifted, and despite his struggles, slammed onto the same pedestal that had held a disembowelled corpse just seconds ago.

“My dear boy,” Nathaniel caressed Riki’s hair. “You have saved me. Saved us all.”

Riki’s traditional response to adversity and threat was to meet the person’s gaze, stand his ground, but he could not risk opening his eyes, so instead he managed to break one of his hands free and landed a solid punch into

Nathanial's face. It did not have the desired effect, Nathanial simply blinked then smiled.

"You are feisty, I shall give you that, and had we more time I would enjoy you more, but there is none to spare."

Riki felt two hands grasp his head and then enormous pressure. He tried to struggle, tried to get away but he couldn't and he feared this thing, whatever it was, would crush his skull. "Stop! Stop!" Fuck! Fuck, Iason! Iason, make it stop!

"Look. At. Me."

The voice above him was soothing, hypnotic, but still Riki kept his eyes closed. A scream tore from him as the pressure increased and in reflex his eyes opened to Nathanial's waiting gaze.

"There you are, my dear."

"No..." Riki tried to look away but he couldn't. It was happening again, all over again. "Why...why me? Tell me why it has to be me?"

"Because you have the power."

"I have no power!"

"Oh, but you do, and that power will save our entire race, which is on the edge of extinction. Your death will be for such a good cause, my son."

"Your...son..."

"Yes." The pressure against his head eased and became a caress. "Now, we can be together forever." His hand cupped Riki's neck, tilted his head to the side. "Just as it should be."

"How?" Riki began as Nathaniel's mouth moved closer.

"I am your father. I have all of his memories, his essence stored inside of me. I adore you, as a father must adore his son."

“Father?”

“It won’t hurt, I promise you,”

“It...won’t hurt...” Riki repeated. “But this will.”

The King cried out as Riki’s teeth met his ear at the same time a sharp knee hit his groin. Riki shoved Nathaniel aside and ran for the door, but a large hand appeared upon it before he could pull it open.

“You are already adapting to my power, that *is* impressive.” The King murmured as a powerful hand spun Riki away from escape and pinned him against the wall. “But it matters not. Soon, you will not care about your former life.”

Those dark eyes again trapped Riki again along with the deep, hypnotic voice and he could feel the pull of it as he had before. “No.”

“Yessss.” The King caught Riki’s hands and pulled him away from the door towards a second stone pedestal, free from corpses. “This is what you want, what we both want. To be father and son, once again.”

Riki followed, not because he wanted to, but because he had no choice. He didn’t want this to happen again, to hear himself saying things he didn’t mean, to obey every command he was given and have no control of himself.

Suddenly the door flew open and an enraged Blondie stood at the entranceway. Nathaniel barely had the chance to turn when he found himself being thrown back against the far wall that was filled with indented chambers of other wrapped bodies.

“Riki!” Iason moved to his beloved, but as the mongrel started to reach out a hand a strange red device hit Iason in the back and sparks of electricity flowed around and through the Blondie.

“Iason!” Riki screamed as he watched Iason jolt and shiver and then drop to the floor with a terrifyingly solid impact. “Iason!” Riki dove for him, but Nathaniel pulled him back. “You mother fucker! I’ll kill you!”

Nathanial was startled by the sudden rage in the tiny human, and was even more surprised that some of the mongrel's blows actually caused him pain, but he did not have time to continue this fight. He tossed Riki against the wall, watched the boy slam into it, and then slowly slide down.

"I would have made this easy for you," Nathanial growled as he stalked over and lifted Riki up by the throat. "I did not wish to cause you pain."

"F...fuck you!" Riki spat at him and clawed at the hands at his throat. "Y... You...think I can't...handle ...pain? T...try being the p...pet of a Blondie!"

Nathanial's eyes flashed in anger and he dragged Riki back towards the center of the room and threw him onto the pedestal again, hard enough to knock the wind out of him and cause Riki to see stars.

"Please..." he heard himself as he watched the King's eyes turn a sickening yellow and his pupils shrink to just a slit inside that golden sphere. Fear filled Riki as he was pushed backwards against the cold stone and the King climbed over him. "Don't..."

"I will not ravage you," the King assured, coldly. "I am not as barbaric as your master." Again Riki's head was tilted to the side. "It will only take a moment."

As Riki's head was turned, the vision of Iason's prone form came within Riki's direct line of sight. A scream rose in his throat, but did not break the surface. He wanted to move but he couldn't. He wanted to resist, to fight, struggle and cry out, but all he could manage was a single tear, which slipped out of his right eye, slid down over his nose and to his other cheek. From his peripheral vision, he saw gleaming, white elongated teeth, and then suddenly a green flash surrounded them.

"Get away from my son!"

The Queen stood in the doorway of the chamber, her hands still glowing from the fireball she had thrown at the King. She gasped as she saw the true face of the demon, blue-green scales, fanged teeth and three eyes, then it was gone and the beast looked like her husband once more.

“My love,” Nathaniel began and stepped towards her. “What has come over....” The second fireball hit him square in the chest and threw him back against the wall again. “Stupid bitch!” he roared and surged to his feet.

As he charged, Riki once again broke free of the trance, rolled off the pedestal and grabbed the first thing his hand could reach, which happened to be the severed leg of the corpse that was being consumed earlier.

He put himself between the Queen and the demon and swung with all his might, but the blow only startled the King enough to stop the charge. The beast did not even try to hide its identity now, perhaps too low on energy from the Queen’s blasts to recover, so they could see its true monstrous form.

“I will kill you all!” It screamed at them and grabbed Riki by the throat once again, but Riki had found a better weapon, a knife that had probably be used to cut open the corpses had been at the base of the pedestal, he thrust it upwards into the monster’s ribs.

The creature howled, dropped Riki and stumbled back, then grinning, pulled the knife free of its chest. The Queen blasted it a third time, but this time her attack did no more than make him stumble back a few steps.

“Fool!” he laughed. “Your spent all your energy on saving yourself, stupid woman. I killed you once, and I will do so again!”

The Queen did look weak, and had to brace herself against the doorway but her hand continued to flame. “I will... not lose my son.... again!” She threw the fireball, nearly overbalancing herself to do so, but the creature neatly avoided it, and advanced towards her.

“Nice try.” The false King grinned through the gaping hole at its neck “But I too have come back from death, and will do so again, and again. I will *always* come back! You will not be so lucky.” He threw the knife.

“No!” Riki swung out, felt the knife slice through his arm, but it was enough to change the trajectory and cause the weapon to land on the left side of the Queen instead of in her chest, where it had been aimed.



“No one can stop me!” the being roared, and then paused as his head was suddenly trapped in a vice. “Wha...”

“Don’t be so sure.”

The creature barely had time to gasp, as its neck was snapped and then its head detached from its body.

“Come back from that,” Iason said as he tossed the King’s head against the back wall with the other bodies.

“Iason!” Riki rushed forward into the Blondie’s arms. “I thought you were dead! I thought we were both dead!”

“Didn’t I tell you that I would always protect you?”

“Yes, but there was all that electricity and you dropped like a stone and didn’t move and...”

Iason cut off Riki’s tirade by kissing him, hard. “It was not a pleasant feeling, but it takes more than that to incapacitate me. I simply had to wait for my mechanical systems to reset.” And the waiting had terrified him, as he watched, his organic processes still intact, that monster about to kill his beloved Riki.

“You...are safe now,” the Queen sighed, causing them both to suddenly remember her presence. “This time...I saved you.”

Riki pushed away from Iason and rushed forward as the Queen swayed and fell to her knees, he caught her before her head could hit the floor. “Don’t die!” he insisted, awkwardly cradling her. “You can’t, not now!”

“Oh?” she raised a trembling hand to his face. “Why not?”

“Because!” She stared at him, and her eyelids grew heavy. “Because....because you...I...I think you’re my...my mother!”

Her eyes widened suddenly and then grew moist before they started to close. “I am...I am your mother.” She slid her arms around his neck and

held him tight for a moment before her remaining strength failed her. “I’ve... missed you.” Her eyes closed even as a single tear escaped from one eye and rolled down her dark cheek. Her arms grew slack and she started to drift backwards in his arms.

“Please don’t die. Please!” Riki stared up at Iason. “Do something! You have to do something!”

“I can do nothing, Riki.” Iason was no physician and even if he had some limited knowledge, he didn’t have any idea what ailed the Queen, so how could he cure what he did not know? It pained him to not give Riki what he wanted, so much so that it drove him to kneel beside his love. “I am sorry.”

The Queen opened her eyes again, smiled weakly. “I am not dying, my dear.” Again she caressed his cheek. “The spell I had to use to...to ward off death is difficult. The after effects are...extreme, but I am... not... dying.” Again her eyes closed and this time they did not reopen.

“I don’t understand.”

Yiela suddenly appeared, and crouched before them. “Her Majesty used a protective spell to decrease the damage of the King’s attack. It weakened her greatly and put her in a death like state, but she was able to awaken and come to your aid.” She placed her hand over Riki’s as she recalled the moment her Queen had awakened and mentally summoned her, the moment when her grief had turned to joy. “Using magic against the...” She stopped herself for that beast had been no King. “The creature has weakened her further, but it is not lethal. She simply needs rest.”

Riki stared down at the unconscious woman in his arms. “She...she’s asleep?”

“Yes, Maku. Just asleep.”

“But she’ll wake up, right?”

“Yes, in a day or so.” The woman held his gaze. “Will you stay until she awakens again?”

Riki looked at Iason who nodded.

“Yeah, we’ll stay.”

“You’re bleeding,” Iason stated, pulled away the armored chest plate he still wore and tore a long strip off the softer tunic beneath to wrap around Riki’s injured arm.

“Come.” Yielā surprised them both when she lifted the Queen into her arms as though she weighted nothing at all. “I will lead you out of this insipid place.”

They followed her back through the tunnel, Iason’s eyes lightening the way. It seemed that they walked for hours, but it was actually only about thirty minutes, and finally they came to a set of steps leading up.

Iason and Riki pushed the overhead doors up and open and they stepped out into the evening air and the moment Iason stepped through Jupiter’s voice boomed inside his head and drove him down to one knee.

“What’s wrong?” Riki demanded quickly moving to the Blondie.

*How dare you shield your mind from me!*

*I was unaware of your presence until this moment.*

*Do you not think I know when you are insincere?*

*Forgive me. It was a lapse in judgment. It will not happen again.*

“Damn it! Tell me what is wrong with yo...” Riki was also suddenly driven to his knees as Jupiter invaded his mind as well. “Oh...fuck!”

*Are you injured? Have they harmed you?*

“G...get out of my head!” he growled, unable to take the intensity because of what had happened with the King. “P...please, it hurts!”

The pressure in his mind immediately eased and he collapsed to the ground.

“Riki!” Iason lunged towards him, but Jupiter suddenly captured his mind again and refused to allow him further movement.

*How is the boy injured?*

*The King had mental powers, he forced himself into Riki’s mind and he is still suffering from that. With your presence as well it is probably too much, he is just a Human after all.*

Jupiter was silent for a moment. *Are you well? Are you injured, my son?*

*Minimal damage, I assure you. Please, allow me to tend to Riki.*

*Will you ever hide from me again?*

Iason though, for a moment, that he detected a note of hurt in Jupiter’s words, but that was impossible. *I will not.*

“What is happening?” Yielā asked, confused as Iason pulled Riki into his arms, as the mongrel started to moan. “Is it his head? Does he feel pain?”

“Riki? Riki, talk to me. Where does it hurt?”

Riki moaned again in agony and gripped his head as if trying to pull his hair out, his entire body rose up like a bow ready to be sprung.

Yielā gently lay her Queen upon the ground and crouched beside Riki. “I can help him. Will you allow it?”

Iason didn’t want to, the people of this place had done enough damage, but she seemed loyal to Riki and she had helped him before... He nodded.

Very carefully she placed her hands on either side of Riki’s head and leaned her face close enough that their foreheads touched. She whispered some strange, lyrical words, and brushed her cheek against his, then did the same with the other side. She pulled back and touched her lips to his forehead, then his eyes, each time muttering in her own language.

“Seystrine lygcuse megastl,” she said and Riki’s eyes flew open to lock with hers. “Yullsht seystrine megastl.”

Riki’s agony increased, as if something was trying to grow bigger from within. He winced and groaned, but his eyes stayed locked with hers as the pressure in his head increased tenfold. A cry of pain started to tear from him, but then, suddenly the pain was gone, as if someone had popped and deflated whatever had been inside his head.

Iason’s eyes narrowed dangerously, seeing the pain his lover was in and about to pull the woman away, but then Riki released a soft sigh in a way that he only ever did when he had found release.

“Riki?” he asked, concerned as Yielā pulled back. There were tears streaming down her face, her eyes were dark with pain, but even as he watched, her expression eased, her eyes lightened.

“I...I’m okay.”

“It was a seed,” Yielā rasped and sounded as if she had been running a marathon. “The creature planted it, to be revived at his discretion, the...first time that he charmed Maku. It would have gone unnoticed unless...”

“He received further telepathic interference?” Iason supplied quietly as he cradled Riki, whose eyes had closed as his breathing evened out.

“Yes.” Yielā closed her eyes, released a steadying breath then slowly rose. “It has been removed and he will have no further trouble.”

Riki opened his eyes, met hers and reached for her hand. “Thank...you.”

“It is my duty to serve you, Maku.” She squeezed his hand.

“No, it isn’t, not really.”

She smiled a little. “On that opinion we differ.” She carefully picked up the Queen again, just as a ship shot overhead, then returned a moment later and slowly lowered to the ground several feet away.

Carrie was the first down the ramp, now looking like her normal self and wearing only Katze's jacket, which covered, just barely, the tops of her thighs.

"Are you alright?" she demanded as Iason helped Riki to stand and a moment later he was in Carrie's arms.

"I'm fine. Really, I'm okay."

Jeeze, what was with all these women needing to embrace him? He had gone years without being near enough to a female to even say hello to one, and with the exception of having sex with a female pet years ago, an action he paid dearly for, no females had ever come near enough to touch him again. Now they were everywhere and being touchy-feely all over the damn place. He was shocked that Iason wasn't trying to disembowel any of them, frankly.

Carrie released him and turned to Iason, gripping his arms. "And you? Still all in one piece?" She looked him up and down and walked around him, ignoring the gasp from Katze who was limping towards them.

Iason smirked at Katze, he could understand the man's surprise, for no one ever touched an Elite in so familiar a way, not even another Elite. However, Carrie was different from anyone he had ever met before, not only that but she had risked her life for him and Riki both, so he would allow her some leeway.

"I appear to be intact."

"So what happened with the King? Was he one of those things too?"

"Those things?"

"The guards we were fighting, some of them were not Human, or at least not originating from this planet."

"Ah, yes. It appears that the King, and I imagine his guards, were Vliphehshie."

Katze's eyes widened. "Why would they be here disguising themselves as Humans?"

"It is how they conquer" Iason supplied. "First they assimilate into the population, learn about it, and then find a way to destroy it and take over."

Carrie shivered. "Horrible. Is everyone on this planet those things then?"

"Clearly the Queen and this young woman are not, that is as far as I can say for certain."

"Iason, Jupiter is in orbit," Katze reported. "She wants us on her ship, now."

"I promised to stay." Riki turned to Iason and in a much lower voice that only the Elite would hear. "You said I could..."

"If it were up to me I would allow it, but Jupiter will not be denied. We must go to her, Riki."

"I can't! I have questions and I need answers. I...I need to find out why the King wanted me and what power he was talking about!"

"I understand, and we will discuss this with Jupiter."

"What if she refuses to let me come back?"

Iason's silence spoke volumes.

"You must not go, Maku," Yielia refused. "You must stay and speak with the Queen!"

"I know but..."

"We will protect you! We..."

"You cannot even protect yourselves!" Iason snapped. He was grateful to the woman for helping Riki, but he was not about to leave him with her. "How many of your people are infected by the Vliphehshie? Who can you be sure to trust?"

“The Queen will truly die if her son is not here to see her when she wakes. If you have any mercy at all in you, any pity, please allow Maku to wait until she has been revived!”

“As I said, it is no longer up to me.”

“Iason, we really should go, before more people come and spot us.”

Iason nodded at Katze and took Riki’s arm. “Come Riki.”

Riki looked at the woman who may be his mother, lying in the arms of another, then turned and followed.

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Katze flew them back into space, and docked with Jupiter’s ship. Katze and Guy were assessed by a medical droid and immediately taken to the infirmary, while Riki, Iason and Shiao were all guided down a long corridor by a regal looking Jade. Several crewmembers turned to watch their small parade, and murmurs of distaste began about the outlawed Onyx

They came to a stop outside of a room and the Jade nodded to Iason.

“Jupiter requires your presence immediately,” he said. “The others will wait here.”

“Iason...” Riki began, but Iason simply caressed his cheek and kissed him.

“Behave yourself and I shall give you a treat later.”

“I’m not a fucking puppy, you prick.”

Iason turned away, pleased that his remark had returned Riki to his usual stubborn self and stepped through the door.

Shiao stood quietly, eying the Jade who continued to watch him meticulously.



Riki sat, then rose again, then sat. Finally he crossed his arms over his chest and started to pace. How long was this going to take? What was Iason telling Jupiter? What were they saying? Would he be dragged back to Amoï before he could see the Queen again? What about all those people who were about to become victims of...of....whatever the fuck Iason said those aliens were. People could be dying while they were up here waiting. Not that he even cared about them, people died every day, but, what if the aliens got to the Queen? What if someone killed her before....?

“Riki.”

Riki spun around and stared at Iason.

“Jupiter would like to speak with you now.”

Riki stepped up to him, and could see that Iason was disturbed. Was that... pain in his eyes, or something else? “What did she do to you?”

“I am fine, Riki.”

“You’re not! You’re....”

Iason pulled Riki into his embrace. “I was unsettled, that is all. Jupiter has cleared me.”

Riki didn’t like the sound of that. “Tell me what she did,” he said in a small voice. “Please.”

“You may ask her yourself, though I do not believe she will tell you.” He nudged Riki towards the door. “Do not keep her waiting.”

Riki did not need to ask if Iason would wait for him, he was reasonably sure the Blondie wouldn’t be letting him out of his site for a while.

He stepped inside the room and the door slid shut behind him. The room was in semi darkness, with only a small golden light towards the middle of the chamber, where a chair sat waiting. Knowing the routine he walked to it, hesitated and then sat down.

“Welcome, Riki.”

Jupiter's voice was soft and gentle as a hologram of the Human woman he had started to relate to appeared before him.

"I will not speak telepathically, for I do not wish to injure you again. I wish you to be comfortable."

"What did you do to Iason?"

"Iason had suffered some damage to his systems as well as his organic side from the electrical charge. I repaired what I could and he will see the physician for the rest."

"He was hurt! He said he was okay!"

"Are you so naive to believe that Iason only tells you the truth of things?"

Riki scowled. "No." He knew that Iason often lied for his benefit as well as other reasons, but then he wasn't always completely truthful either.

"Were you concerned for his wellbeing?"

Riki remained silent. Of course he was, but admitting that aloud seemed... shameful. "So, what happens now?"

"Now? We return to Amoï, of course."

"We can't! There are people down there, creatures pretending to be Human and they're trying to..."

"The Vliphehshie have departed. They were no match for our weapons."

So there had been more? "An invasion?"

"That does appear to have been their reasoning."

"And Jupiter had fought them off? "Why?"

“Please specify.”

“Why...did you fight them off? Why did you stop the invasion? They are nothing to you, right?”

“They were preventing me from recovering what was mine, therefore they were destroyed.”

“You...you destroyed all of them?”

“No, only a handful, the remaining ships went to warp and escaped.”

“Oh.” It was hard to believe that while he was fighting for his life on the planet, there had been a battle high above it. “What about those on the planet?”

“That is no longer a concern.”

“It *is* a concern! It’s my concern and I need to go back!”

“You will be careful with your tone, Riki. I *am* Jupiter.”

Riki grew stubbornly silent.

“Those on the surface are, even now gathering the remaining Vliphehshie. They appear to have the situation in hand, so there is no reason to remain.”

“No, I’m stay...” Riki swallowed and rephrased. “I’d like to stay.”

“Request denied.”

“Just for a few days, until the Queen wakes up...”

“The matter is closed. My decision is final.”

“But I gave my word!” Riki insisted. “She saved my life. I *owe* her.”

“It was she who endangered your life, therefore you owe her nothing.”

“Look, you started this by fucking around inside my head and bringing back all these memories and shit! Now you're gonna refuse to let me get some answers?”

“Your desire to be with her is illogical. She abandoned you, kidnapped you and imprisoned you. Why would you wish to stay with such a person?”

Riki didn't bother to point out that Iason had done two of those three and he was still with him. “I think she's my mother! I have the right to talk to her! I have the right to know for sure.”

“You are a pet. You have no rights but those that your master awards you.”

Riki flushed and curled his hands into fists, then, with great effort and swallowing the lump of pride rising in his throat, he spoke slowly and distinctly. “Iason...said that I could stay.” The words burned as they passed his lips and left a bitter taste in his mouth. Even after all this, he hated having to admit to having a master.

“I will question her and learn the answers for you,” she offered, her tone gentle now, softer. “Such interactions will only distress you further.”

“No, damn it!”

Riki gripped his hair, he could feel another headache coming on and was trying to battle it back. He wanted this, needed this time with the Queen to understand who and what he was. It was distressing him, that was true, but he would be more distressed if he didn't ask the questions and get some answers. He wouldn't beg for it, though, fuck that. After everything that Jupiter, Guy Iason and now these new people have put him through the past few weeks he was not going to beg like a common street rat.

He straightened, pushed down his anger, his hate and his humiliation and lifted his gaze to Jupiter's hologram. He only had one thing left to barter with.

“They say I'm a Prince,” he stated quietly, and those words also burned in his throat, because accepting that idea, even for a moment, meant that his

entire life had been a farce; that his struggle for identity had been a universal joke, and the joke was on him. "If that's true...if that's true then I have some kind of power here. You could use that power, if you wanted to."

"I have no use for it."

"What about the food here? We...maybe we could do something about that? People on Amoï would kill to get this kind of food."

"Are you suggesting a trade agreement?"

Was he? He didn't have knowledge of such matters, but if that was what it would take for her to let him stay, maybe he could ask the Queen for that favor. Fuck, another favor. He hated being indebted to others.

"It's...a consideration."

"It means that much to you to remain here?"

"I don't want to stay here forever," he insisted. "I *know* I have to go back, but I gave my word..."

"You also gave your word to Iason to remain with him. Not to run."

"I'm not running! I'm not leaving him, I couldn't..." His voice drifted off on the verge of admitting how totally connected he now felt to the Blondie.

Jupiter's hologram flickered for a second then resumed a more imposing form. "Do you think being a Prince will change your status? You are the pet of a Blondie. You assured us you had come to terms with this and would no longer try to deny it. This was the agreement we made and now you would break your word to us, for the sake of keeping it for another?"

"No! I..." Shit. She sounded angry? Was she able to get angry? Maybe he had over extended himself. "Just a few days! Why is it so hard for you to understand that I only want to stay for a few days?"

Jupiter's multi colored form surged forward and a strange blocky hand caressed Riki's cheek, startling him. "You are ours."

“W...what?”

“You may wish to remain with your mother. You may grow close to her, due to the connection you hold of blood.” Jupiter's tone changed, and she actually seemed almost sad for a moment. “You will no longer require our attentions. You may no longer desire such contact from us.”

Was that what this was about and why had Jupiter returned to referring to herself in the plural sense again? Did the AI believe he would stop their sessions if he stayed and got to know his mother? But that made no sense. What difference would it make to her? He was just a mongrel that she wanted to study, right?

“I...” He wasn't sure what to say, couldn't comprehend her reasoning, so he said the only thing that might aid his cause. “We...can still do that.”

Jupiter stared at him, her eyes changing colors from dark to light, back to dark again.

“I...I mean...you're trying to understand Humans better, right?”

“Correct.”

“Then....then whatever answers I get, well...maybe they'll help you...help us both understand. I mean, I still don't quite know why all this happened, why they didn't try to look for me until now. I have questions too, and I'm...angry and...” Hurt. He was hurt that they had never looked for him, but he couldn't admit to that. “We...we um...started this together so we should finish it together, right?”

“You are willing to do this? To share more with us? To continue our sessions and assist us in garnering further information?”

“Yeah, I mean...sure. I've got the hang of it now, although I like this...this talking out loud better than you messing around inside my head, but if that way works better for you, then that's okay too.”

Jupiter moved back, appeared to consider the offer, then nodded.

“You may stay, for three days. If she does not wake within that time, you must still leave. I will return with my fleet and leave a ship here for you and Iason to return to Amoï. Do not test me, Riki. You will be back on Amoï by the morning of the fourth day, or I will return here and destroy this planet.”

Riki nodded, solemnly. She’d returned to a singular identity, did she do that for him, to make him understand her better?

“Three days,” he agreed quietly.

“Good. Now allow me inside, I wish to repair whatever damage has been done.”

“No! I...I mean I’m okay.” When Jupiter’s hologram appeared angry again, he continued. “I’ve too many people in there already. Can we...can we just save it for another time? I just have a headache and there was a girl on the planet that helped, so I really am okay now.”

“You will report to the medical bay with Iason and allow them to run a full diagnostic, before you return to the surface.”

“Yeah, okay. That’s fine.”

“You may go. Send in the Onyx”

Riki rose and moved to the door, then paused and turned back. “Jupiter?”

“Yes, Riki?”

“Thanks.”

“You are welcome, Riki.”

Jupiter watched the boy leave and the door slide shut and as it did she smiled.

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”I’m not leaving you!”

Katze refused from the medical bed, after Iason had given him orders to return home. Iason had cleaned up and changed out of the guard's uniform and back into his usual white and red attire.

When Iason narrowed his gaze, Katze quickly lowered his voice. "Iason, I know I've screwed this whole thing up, but my place is where you need me and..."

"Where I need you is back on Amoï to ensure that there will be no further surprises when Riki and I return home and that all the dissidents have been dispersed."

"Yes, but..."

"Are you doubting my assessment of the situation, Katze?"

Riki watched as Katze held Iason's chilling gaze for several long seconds, and couldn't help but be impressed.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Katze finally replied. "I just think I would be more help to you here."

"You are injured..."

"The doctor fixed me up, I'm fine!"

"Do not interrupt me again."

Katze quickly lowered his eyes and Riki could not blame him, he recognized that quiet, threatening tone all too well and had also learned to obey.

"You will return with the Fleet and meet with Raoul. I will need a full report of what has happened in my absence."

Katze wanted to say that he could get the damn report by contacting Raoul himself, but he didn't, and when Iason stepped up to the med bed braced a hand on the other side of where Katze's head lay, he was glad he had held his tongue.



“I need to know that someone I trust is taking care of this. I need to know that it is safe to bring Riki home.” Iason watched as Katze’s ears turned slightly red. “You have never failed me, Katze, not this time nor any other.”

“Yes, but I...”

“Never, Katze.” Iason held the red head’s gaze saw his uncertainty turn to relief and acceptance. “Good.” He straightened.

Katze sat up slowly, despite the med droid’s protests, and swung his legs over. He wore a green gown and the ankle that had been bitten had been tended to and a patch of Nu Skin had been wrapped over it to allow it to heal without scarring.

“Don’t let your guard down, Iason. From what you told me this society is to easily fooled, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be just as aggressive to fool someone else.”

Iason almost smiled. “Are you telling me to watch my back?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“I’ll watch it,” Riki stated quietly. “So you rest and get better.”

Katze smirked, carefully rose and pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his jacket, which Carrie had returned to him. “You’re the reason he has to watch his back,” he stated as he calmly lit one, watched Riki’s eyes narrow, and then tossed him the pack. “Don’t say I never gave you anything.”

Riki would have lit one right there if Iason had not grabbed the pack from him.

“Come on!”

“Later, we need to go so that Jupiter and the fleet can leave.”

“What if those aliens come back?”

“They will not be back.” Not after facing Jupiter, Iason thought. They would probably leave this galaxy altogether. “Let us get to our shuttle.”

“Hey, you working on all cylinders now or what?”

Iason slid his arm around Riki’s shoulders. “Your concern overwhelms me.”

“Fuck off!” Riki spat, and shrugged Iason’s arm off, but when the Blondie simply wrapped it around him again a second later, he didn’t pull away. “You lied to me.”

“No, I don’t believe I ever did.”

“You said you were fine.”

They stepped into a lift that would bring them to the shuttle bay, and Iason pulled Riki hard against him to capture his mouth in a deep, soulful kiss that made the mongrel’s toes curl inside his boots.

“I want to take you right here,” he growled as his hand snaked inside Riki’s shirt and up his back.

“You can’t!”

“Excuse me?”

Riki stumbled as Iason pushed him against the wall of the elevator. Well, of course he could, Iason could do whatever the hell he wanted. “Can’t you wait?”

“Why should I?”

“I...” Riki turned his head sideways and let his body go limp. “I’m...I’m really not up for it.”

Iason scowled and pulled back, catching Riki’s chin and lifting it to meet his gaze. “The doctor healed your arm and said you were fine. Are you still hurting?”

“I...it’s just...” Riki couldn’t put his feelings into words. All he knew was that his head was so full he couldn’t even think about trying to have sex right now. However, Iason would have his way and fighting it was a waste of time. “Fine, do whatever you want.”

This only seemed to piss Iason off and he released Riki quickly and stepped away from him. He thought they were beyond such nonsense?

The lift doors opened and they stepped into the shuttle bay, just as Guy was about to step in

“Hey, I was looking for you.”

“Pity you found us,” Iason retorted.

Guy ignored the Blondie and spoke to Riki. “Are you okay?”

“More or less.”

“Are you going back to Amoï?”

Iason dropped a possessive hand on Riki’s shoulder. “Our destination is not your concern.”

“I was talking to Riki.”

“I did not give you permission to do so.”

“Permission? Fuck you, you...”

Riki suddenly pulled away. “I’m gonna be sick.” He bolted across the hanger towards a door marked Cleansing and hurried inside.

“See what you did!” Guy hissed and went to follow, but Iason caught his arm in a vice grip.

“It is your presence that continues to upset him. If you were no longer here, he would be fine.”

Guy watched Iason eye one of the airlocks and his eyes narrowed.

“Always in control, ain’t ya, Mink?” he tossed trying to turn the conversation away from his immediate demise.

“Your point?”

“You're missin' out,” Guy stated slyly.

“On?” Iason returned, without interest.

“Well, I assume you're the one in control of Riki.”

“That has never been in question.”

“In the bedroom I mean.”

Iason lifted his head and cold eyes bore into Guy's. “Naturally.”

“Like I said, you're missing out.” Guy knew he was skating on thin ice, but he couldn't leave without taking another poke at his adversary one last time.

Iason slowly released Guy’s arm. “Obviously you are insinuating that you know something about Riki that I don't. I can assure you that there is *nothing* I do not know about Riki.”

“Do you know what it's like to be topped by him?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“See, you *don't* know everything.”

“I do not understand your verbiage, explain.”

“Like I said, you're loss.” Iason made a grab for him, but Guy scrambled back, and ran smack into Shiao who was exiting the elevator. “Oh, hey! You’re not dead?” Guy could not deny that when Shiao had been called in to speak with Jupiter he had worried that the AI would decide to destroy the Onyx.

“Apparently.” Shiao glanced over the mongrel's shoulder as Iason advanced. With an inward sigh he put himself between Guy and the angry Blondie. “Yet here you are trying to get me killed.”

“Sorry,” Guy smirked, allowing his relief that the Onyx was okay to release some animosity, and because he felt no compunction about hiding behind the Onyx. “Come on, we can take him.”

“I think not. Now, Iason...” Shiao held up a hand. “This is not the time for...”

“I merely wish him to explain his statement. I have no intentions of injuring him.” Iason paused for effect. “At this time.”

Shiao's eyebrows rose. “Truly?”

“Really?” Guy added, also shocked.

“I see the mongrel has recovered,” Iason continued. “Well enough to travel?”

“Are you demanding our departure, Iason?”

“More of a recommendation.” The Blondie's eyes narrowed on Guy. “For your mongrel's continued good health.”

Shiao chuckled. “Fair point well made.” Shiao held out his hand and Iason lifted an eyebrow. “It's a human custom I know, but I rather favor it.”

Iason felt a nudge from behind and looked down at Riki who was now standing beside him, his arms folded and his hips cocked.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, noticing the pallor of Riki's skin.

“Yeah.” Riki hadn't actually thought he was going to be ill, but his stomach and head had been doing flip flops for a while now, and the moment he entered the wash area it all came to a head...and from his head, out his mouth and into the nearest basin, as androids didn't use toilets. The moment he had vomited, however, he felt almost a hundred percent better.

Iason had assumed Riki's gentle push was an encouragement to return Shiao's gesture, so he folded his hand into the Onyx's surprisingly larger one.

“It has been an experience, Iason.”

“Yes. One I hope never to repeat.”

“Agreed.” Shiao released Iason's grip and extended his hand to Riki, noticing the momentary shock on the mongrel's face before it was quickly hidden by disinterest. He forced away a smile. Pet and master was so very much alike it was frightening.

“Most Elite's won't even touch me,” Riki tossed.

“I am *not* an Elite.”

“Well, you sure as hell don't act like one.” Riki felt Iason's nudge this time, smirked and shook Shiao's hand. “Thanks, for all you did.”

“You are very welcome, Riki. I'd like to say stay in touch, but...” He glanced knowingly at Iason and saw that Riki's gaze followed upwards.

“Yeah, he has issues.”

Shiao did smile then. “Don't we all?”

Riki almost, *almost* smiled, but he pulled it back and remained stoic. “Take care of that asshole behind you,” Riki nodded towards Guy, who flushed. “He *also* has issues.”

“Come on man.”

Can I have a minute with Guy, Iason?”

“No.”

Riki sighed heavily and crossed his forearms again. “Iason.”

“One minute then.”

“Five.”

“Two. Don't push me Riki.”

Riki nodded. “Two minutes.” His gaze bore into Iason's. “Alone.”

“You are to stay within my sight.”

“You can see me just fine from over by the shuttles.” Actually, Iason could probably see him perfectly if he were perched on the planet below.

Iason glared at Guy, then turned in a flourish of cloth and stalked away. Shiao winked at the two young men, squeezed Guy's shoulder in encouragement, and slowly followed the brooding Blondie.

“Thanks, man. I wanted to...”

Riki held up his hand. “I don't care what you wanted, I'm doing this for me.”

Guy grew quiet. “Okay. Whatever you want. I'll do anything, Riki. I just want you to forgive me.”

“I do forgive you.”

“Really? Do you mean it?” Excited, Guy went to hug him and Riki shoved him back, but not too hard. “S...sorry.”

“I forgive you, but this is it for us. Do you understand? I said it at Orphe's and I'll say it again here. Stop thinking about me, stop looking for me and stop trying to help me escape. I'm not running anymore. Not from you, or Iason or anyone, and if you continue to chase me, it's not Iason who'll hurt you, but me.”

“R...Riki.”

"I'll read your letter, because I owe you for helping us out, but then that's it. Afterwards I owe you nothing and you don't owe me. We are done. No more contact, no more messages, no more anything. Get me?"

Guy nodded slowly. "Yeah, I get it. You hate me."

"No, Guy. I don't feel anything for you. My last bit of feeling was washed away when you let Orphe torture me."

"I...I didn't know they were gonna do that! I tried to stop them!"

"It doesn't matter. You made your choices and so have I. My choice is to never see you again. You're part of a past I don't want to remember. Can you understand?"

"Yeah," Guy nodded. "Yeah I can."

"I hope you can be happy, Guy, and that you find a good, solid place for yourself with Shiao, or whoever else you decided to be with, but after today I'm never gonna think about you again, and I want the same promise from you."

"I can't not think about you, Riki. I lov..."

"No, you don't. You loved the idea of me and that idea was never real. Let it go. Let me go, because I have already let you go."

Guy was choking back tears, but he managed to nod again. "Okay. Okay, I get it. I will, I'll try and do what you ask, but you've been such a big part of my life, I mean we've been together since we were kids and..." Guy realized he was trying to make Riki feel guilty and immediately stopped. "I'm so very sorry for hurting you."

"I know you are." Riki's expression finally softened, but he disagreed with Guy's statement. He was *never* a kid. "And it's because we were friends and went through all that shit that I can forgive you now. This is the final thing I can do because of what we were together, but one more incident, one more



bad choice on your part, man, and I will not only hate you, but I may even kill you myself.”

Guy's eyes widened at the idea. He had seen this side of Riki several times before, when they were together in Ceres, but it had never been directed at him; never at him. It felt odd and frightening and he was ashamed that it had come to this.

“No. I'm done, Riki. Really and truly this time. I can see that you want to be with Iason and I'm gonna stop trying to figure out why. I've got a new life now too...” He had wanted to share that life with Riki, but he realized now that was an unrealistic dream. Riki did not forgive easily and he finally understood that the fact Riki had given him more chances and had kept Iason from murdering him several times, that he had been given far more free passes than Riki the Dark ever would have given to anyone else. “Anyway, I won't bother you again. Shiao and me, we may have to come here on occasion for business, but you can pretend not to know me. I won't talk to you or seek you out. My word on it.”

Riki nodded curtly, and then suddenly pulled Guy into his arms for a hard, decisive hug that again brought tears to Guy's eyes at the finality of it.

“Goodbye, Guy.”

“Bye, Riki.” Guy watched his friend shove his hands in his pockets, turn and walk away, just as Iason and Shiao started walking towards them. Iason slid an arm around Riki's shoulders and leaned down to say something. Guy watched Riki nod, then turn, just a little into Iason's touch.

Guy had forced Riki to make this choice, and it was hurting both of them.

Riki slid into the passenger seat on the shuttle as their assigned pilot readied for take-off, then glanced up as Iason settled beside him and handed him a glass of wine. His eyebrows rose.

“It will settle you.”

“I am settled.”

“Just drink the bloody wine, Riki.”

Because he still had a bad taste in his mouth from earlier, he took a sip and was surprised at the fruity bouquet. Iason sat back with his own glass of wine and crossed one leg over the other, even as he watched Riki grip the arm rests as the shuttle started to lift off. His mongrel did not fear much, but he was uneasy when it came to flying.

Riki tipped the rest of his wine back, finishing the glass, then quickly buckled his harness as the shuttle rose and departed the hanger bay, back out into space and towards the planet. He barely felt Iason's hand cover his tight grip on his own chair, as he watched the planet grow closer.

## Chapter 34

### Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Rikki return to Avalon

Iason had expected to be refused clearance to land as he piloted the shuttle towards the space dock, and was quite surprised when they were immediately directed to one of the higher platforms. He made the necessary adjustments for landing and corrected their current course towards the designated area.

“Their sudden acceptance make me suspicious,” he murmured as he glanced over at Riki, who was slouched in the co-pilot’s seat and watching him with hooded eyes. “Are you sleeping?”

“No.” Riki sat up a little and stretched his arms. “I didn’t know you could fly a ship.”

“This is hardly a ship, but yes I am a pilot. I have not been able to indulge recently.”

“Huh.” Riki turned to look out the window. He wasn’t feeling any of the usual panic or nausea he usually experienced with space travel, perhaps his body had just been through too much to care. “Too busy fucking me?”

Iason heard the tone of petulance in Riki’s voice and wondered why. “I certainly enjoy that every chance I can get, and much prefer it to flying.”

Riki crossed his arms over his chest and continued to stare out the window, even as they landed and the vibration from the engines ceased.

Iason unstrapped himself and turned to unstrap Riki, but the mongrel slapped his hand away. “What is wrong?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a pilot? It’s just like your fucking mutation to change your appearance. I have to find out when I see you do it!”

“Riki...”

Riki turned on Iason angrily. “Why do I only know about what you do to me? I don’t even know what you do for work! Am I really just a plaything to you that doesn’t warrant any part of you but your body?”

Iason unstrapped Riki in one quick move and enfolded him as the mongrel started to hyperventilate. “Shhhhhh. It is okay, Riki.”

“Fuck off! It’s not okay! None of this is...okay!” But Riki did not push away, if anything he pushed closer. “What am I to you, really?”

Iason caressed Riki’s hair and kissed the top of his head. “Everything,” he replied truthfully. “You are everything.”

“Then...why don’t we...talk? Why don’t I know these...things about you?”

“I was unaware of your interest, however if you wish to know more about me, you need only ask, Riki. I will tell you everything.”

“Do...You know where you come from, but I...” Riki captured a few strands of Iason’s long hair that fell down his back and twirled them around his fingers. “You know who you are and I...I thought I did but I don’t. Everything I knew is wrong and...and I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

It pained Iason to think Riki was doubting himself, because that was the one quality that had enraptured him about the mongrel; his knowledge of self, his pride and independence. “I am real,” he said firmly, then pulled back and cupped Riki’s face. “We are real, you and I. Nothing else matters...”

“It does matter! It all matters, Iason! I’m not me anymore! I don’t know who I am! I...”

“You know exactly who you are, Riki! You are who you have made yourself become. Nothing will change that. Whether you are a prince or a mongrel you are exactly who you should be because these are the choices you have made. No one can change that, not a horrible childhood or a rediscovered lineage, not even being owned by a Blondie can change *who* you are.”

Riki stared at him, stunned. He had never heard Iason speak so passionately about something other than sex. “I...I’m scared. I don’t fucking like feeling this way!”

“I know, and you do not frighten easily so I can only theorize how badly this is affecting you, but you said that you need answers, is that not why we returned here? If you would rather just leave it alone, we can leave again and no one would be the wiser. It is your choice, your life, Riki.”

“Choice?” he muttered and shook his head. “When have I ever had a choice since meeting you? I thought you said that my life belonged to you?”

“Oh yes, you are mine, there is no debate on that, but as I have explained many times before, because you are mine, I want only what is best for you.”

Riki pulled back so he could properly look at Iason without cracking his neck off. “And what if I am a Prince? What then?”

“It makes no difference.”

“Seriously! How would you like it if you suddenly became a mongrel? Don’t you think your life might change a little bit?”

“That is impossible, I am not Human therefore I could never be a mongrel.”

“You know what I mean!”

“I do not. Regardless of your status here, you are still mine, Riki. And as we live on Amoï, and not here, I do not see why anything should change.”

Riki was so stunned he couldn’t even speak. Did Iason really feel that way? Would it really make no difference to the Blondie that he was a prince and not a mongrel? Would he still be just a pet in Iason’s eyes?

“Fuck you!” He pushed away and rose, moving to the back of the shuttle to lower the ramp. “Why don’t you stay here while I go find the truth about my insignificant life then?”

Iason watched Riki disappear down the ramp, then moved swiftly to follow. He did not understand why Riki was upset with him. These people had done nothing but cause his beloved distress, why should it even matter what they called him? He belonged on Amoï, with Iason, and that would not change.

They spotted four guards coming towards them on the platform and Iason immediately stepped in front of Riki. They were followed by two men in long robes, and a woman.

Yiela stepped out, raised her hands, then elegantly descended to her knees and bowed low against the ground. The guards and robed people who appeared from behind them quickly followed.

Shocked, Riki stepped out from around Iason. “W...what are you doing?”

“Welcome home, Maku,” Yiela said, lifting her head and sitting back demurely on her heels, again the rest followed her lead. “The false King has been destroyed, and our Queen should awaken soon. We await your command, Maku.”

“My...my what?”

“Your command. With the false King gone and the Queen incapacitated you are our new ruler, Maku.”

“Oh, shit.” Riki stepped back behind Iason as if burned. “I didn’t...I can’t...” He peered around at them, then groaned. “Get up already! Why are you kneeling! Get up!”

They rose in one surprisingly smooth action. A man in a grey robe moved forward and bent his head. “My name is Alistair, Maku. I am the King...” He paused, reconsidered. “I was the King’s advisor.”

“Yeah, I remember. What do *you* want?”

“The remaining Vilipshine have been captured, Maku, and await your decision. There were several imposters in the palace, many of them the King’s guard, but we have rectified this situation and these men,” he indicated the guards behind them. “Are of Avalon and are now your personal guards.”

“Is he still not to be trusted?” Iason demanded. “I will not allow you to keep him prisoner again.”

The advisor glanced at Iason, but directed his reply to his Riki

“Do not misunderstand, Maku. The circumstance by which you have been brought home to us were unfortunate and unforgivable, however they were at the King’s orders.”

“The false King,” Riki repeated, scornfully. “Seriously, how stupid do you have to be not to realize your king is some kind of cannibalistic alien?”

Alistair and his aid both flushed.

“We will, of course,” Alistair offered carefully, “Always be in your debt, Maku.”

Riki crossed his arms over his chest and stared at him.

“A...At your word, the Vilipshine, as well as myself and any of the remaining Royal counsel will report to an execution station at your command.”

Iason raised an eyebrow. “That is acceptable.”

“Iason,” Riki muttered, then to Alistair he said. “Why would you do that?”

“Why, for our lack of vigilance, and for the harm and disservice we have done to you, my lord.”

Riki glanced at Iason, he knew what the Blondie’s suggestion would be, kill them all and be done with it, but he wasn’t willing to be responsible for that kind of decision.

“I just came back to see the Queen,” he said quietly, but firmly. “Once I’ve seen her I’m gone, so you can all go on with your lives or dive off the nearest cliff, it makes no difference to me.”

“Maku! Our people are in turmoil. Many of those beasts has been living among us for years. We must do our best to comfort and support them!”

“*Your* people, not mine. I came to back to see the Queen and that is all I am going to do! I’m not killing anybody, or making any declarations or any of that shit. I will talk to the Queen, and then I am gone.”

“Maku” Yielā stepped forward. “You are exhausted. I shall take you back to the palace and you may wait in your chambers for the Queen to awaken.”

“Yeah,” Riki moved to her. “Let’s do that, let’s just go back and...” He turned back when he realized that Iason had not fallen in step behind him, and saw that the four guards had bared the Blondie’s path, their weapons raised. “Really? Are we still on that? He comes with me!”

“Maku,” the advisor began, reasonably. “We must maintain a tight security after the Vilipshine threat! We cannot allow outsiders...”

“He’s the one that eliminated the leader of that threat!” Riki snapped, but before he could say another word, Yielā stepped up to the middle two guards and put her hands on their shoulders.

“Will you continue to shame us by defying the Prince’s wishes?” she asked them softly. “This is his companion, and will be treated with respect.”

The two guards bowed their heads and turned sideways to create an opening for Iason to walk through.

Alistair stepped in front of Yielā. “Know your place, girl...” He began as he grabbed her arm and then found himself suddenly on his knees from the energy that emanated from her.

“My place is at Maku’s side, to make his will known and obeyed.” She stared down at the advisor who was physically shaking from the effect of



her defense, and raised her hand, showing a small, circular green symbol, with three intersecting circles inside of it on her palm. “I have the Queen’s Seal, to avoid any further unpleasantness towards her son. Do you challenge her word?”

The advisor scrambled to his feet and shook his head. “N...no, of course not. We...we will make preparations for a room for the machine...”

Riki suddenly grabbed Alistair by the front of his robe, and pulled him into his space. “I’m sick of your bullshit, so let’s put all our cards on the table. You say I’m a Prince, the ruler of your people, which means you should be obeying me, not contradicting me, right?”

“O...of course, however we cannot deny that *it* is a clear threat...”

“Threat?” Riki pulled Alistair closer and whispered in his ear. “There’s a being named Jupiter in orbit that has enough fire power on her ship to obliterate this planet and everyone on it. This Blondie is her favourite son, and she can see and hear everything that is happening to him. I’m the pet of this Blondie.” Because he could, he licked the advisor’s cheek, emphasizing his next words. “He likes to fuck me in all sorts of places in all sorts of ways, and he’s real protective of me. You upset the pet, you piss off the Blondie, and then a vengeful God destroys your planet. Is that a clear enough *threat* for you?”

Alistair’s eyes had widened to the size of saucers and he visibly trembled. “Y...yes”

Riki shoved him back and straightened. “And for the record, those aliens were preparing to invade your planet, but *his*,” He pointed at Iason. “Creator destroyed them, eliminating another threat that you were all too stupid to see. So you now owe us twice, and if you or anyone else calls him it or a machine one more time, you won’t need to take a trip to the execution center, because I’ll kill you myself.”

Alistair bowed low. “A...as you command, Maku.”

“Mr. Iason,” Yielia smiled up the Blondie. “We have a shuttle to take you both to the Palace.” She directed them towards sleek, silver ship a few feet away. “I’ve arranged for a meal to be prepared and brought to your chambers. Forgive me, but do you eat?”

“I do, yes and it’s just Iason.”

“As you wish.” She waved Riki and Iason towards the small ramp leading into the sleek ship, then followed them inside. The guards stepped in behind her, and then the advisors. “Is there anything we can prepare to make your stay more enjoyable, Iason?”

The difference in how Iason was being treated now than how everyone had behaved towards him before was staggering, but as an Elite he took it in stride. He settled in a seat beside Riki and crossed one long leg over the other, unfazed.

“I am partial to wine.”

“We have some of the best wines in the system here on Avalon. I will be sure to include a flagon with your meal.”

Iason leaned sideways and whispered in Riki’s ear. “That was an impressive bluff back there,” he murmured. “Since Jupiter has already left the system.”

“They don’t know that, so shut up.”

Iason ran a gloved finger down Riki’s cheek. “I rather liked you defending me. It aroused me greatly, so I give you leave to do so again, at any time.”

“Shut up.” Riki batted his hand away.

They rode the remainder of the distance in silence and soon arrived at the palace where they were escorted to Riki’s chambers. All of the locals that they passed bowed their heads and then murmured among themselves along the journey of the new Prince and his escorts.

When they arrived at the now familiar rooms that had once been Riki’s prison, both food and wine were waiting for them, a table for two was set

up on the balcony, which was no longer sealed to keep them inside, and steam rose from the dishes that awaited their taste.

“How did you...” Riki began.

“I have the ability to speak telepathically to your Serago, so they prepared it before we arrived,” Yielā assured and dismissed the advisors who were still trying to talk to Riki about the conditions of the kingdom. “Maku will have this time alone with his companion and is not to be disturbed.” She turned back to Riki and Iason. “Forgive me, but we must still post guards outside of your door, not to keep you here, but to ensure that there are no further allies of Vilipshine about.”

“That is understandable, thank you,” Iason offered as he settled down at the table. “Come Riki, it has been some while since you had nourishment.”

“Uh...yeah, okay.” Riki walked with Yielā back to his door. “Are you okay now? Your injuries...” He stuttered to a halt when he saw her eyes fill with tears. “W...what did I say?”

“Your generosity towards my wellbeing warms my heart, Maku. I am well enough to continue my duties. Your friend tended to my injuries very well, and the palace physician assisted with the rest.”

“So...they’re not gonna try and kill you again, right?”

“Oh no, and I thank you for your interference.” She bent from the waist and her long flowing hair created a curtain almost hiding her face. “I am forever in your debt.”

“No, you’re not. You did me a favor and I repaid it. We’re even.”

She rose, confused. “Maku, my assistance was but a mere whim, what you have done is...”

“We’re even,” he insisted.

She held his gaze for a long moment. “As you wish.” She stepped outside the chamber. “Enjoy your meal. I will go and tend to the Queen.”

“Do you know when she will wake up yet?”

“No, but soon.”

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Raoul had met Jupiter’s ship and was receiving his report from the Captain when he spotted a familiar red head walking down the ship ramp and headed away from them.

“Katze, wait!”

Katze considered pretending he didn’t hear the Blondie, but then decided it wasn’t worth the trouble he would be in for ignoring an Elite, so he stopped walking just before he reached exit portal and waited.

Raoul noticed that the black-market dealer did not turn and walk back him. The former furniture’s stubbornness sometimes rivaled Iason’s pet. He finished his conversation with the Captain, relieved to hear that everything had gone well and Iason would be returning in a few days. Jupiter did not have a physical body, so she had simply transferred her consciousness back to the mainframe of Tanagura and advised him she would contact him shortly.

Katze watched Raoul walk up to him and waited for the Blondie to speak. “Has your injury been healed?”

“Yes.” Katze paused. “Was that all?”

“No. I need you to come with me.”

“Why?”

“Something has happened with Cal and I believe he may be in need of your assistance.”

“Has he been hurt? Did those men capture him again?”

“Yes and no.” Raoul indicated the waiting portal. “Will you accompany me to my home? I will explain when we get there.”

Katze agreed, and while his expression revealed none of his concern, he was very worried what could have happened. They arrived at Raoul’s apartment two portals later, and Raoul took a few minutes to brief Katze on Cal’s situation.

“Where is Bean now?”

“He is still at Iason’s condo. I have warned him not to leave there and according to my sources he seems to be obeying.”

“Why would he do this to Cal?”

“Jealousy, perhaps, or simply an undetected flaw in his character.”

“Iason will have him executed.”

“If Iason is in a forgiving mood, yes,” Raoul agreed as he filled two glasses with a dark, amber liquid. “If, however he is in a different mood, Bean will only wish he were dead.”

Katze accepted the glass that Raoul offered him. “How could this have happened? Cal is too smart...”

“I did not remain with Bean to hear the full story, I was more concerned about finding Cal.”

Katze sipped his drink, stared down into the glass. “Thanks for that.” He knew not every Elite would bother themselves over a Furniture, former or otherwise, that had gotten into an unsavory situation. “How is he handling it?”

“He is Cal,” Raoul returned as he settled on the sofa and crossed one long leg over the other. “When I removed him from the room where he was being violated, his concern seemed that he should clean the sheets.”

Katze dropped down in a chair opposite the sofa. “Fuck.”

“He begged me not to bring him back to the condo or to tell Iason about what happened to him.”

“And you agreed? So you lied to him?”

Raoul’s eyes met Katze’s over the rim of his glass. “He did not say I could not tell you. I assume that you are more familiar with the boy than I, as he spent several months with you, so you are the logical choice to assist him in this matter.”

“There isn’t anything I can do, Raoul.” While Katze understood how horrible it was to be violated, he also knew there was nothing he could do to change it. “What’s done is done.”

“He has not cried.”

Raoul’s quiet statement made Katze’s heart leap and his stomach turn. “At all?”

“No. Not when I rescued him, or when he pleaded for me not to tell Iason. Nor did he cry when I treated his injuries, and they must have been painful.” Raoul shook his head. “Even as three men assaulted him at once, his eyes remained dry as the desert.”

Katze again stared into his glass. “Shit.”

“Indeed. He does not wish to return to Iason’s as yet, and nor is he in any state to do so. Even once Iason returns, I cannot allow Cal to go to him like this.” Raoul set his glass down, leaned forward and braced his arms on his knees as he face Katze. “We Elites do not experience grief or pain. We do not require closure for the instances in our lives that we find disturbing. Humans, however, require that outlet in order to remain healthy. He must be made to grieve, Katze, or he will be useless as both a furniture, and as a human. If that happens, he may end up back at Ranaya Uugo”

Katze nodded, finished off his drink with a final swallow and set it on the glass coffee table. “Yeah.” He rose. “He can’t grieve in front of you or

Iason because of who you are and who he is. But he should feel safe enough in front of me.”

“He is in the second bedroom on the third level.”

Katze headed to the house transportal that would slip him up to the third level in the blink of an eye, but then turned back when Raoul said his name.

Raoul was again sitting back against the cushions of his sofa, his drink in his hand as he stared across the room at a painting on the wall. “I am relieved you returned safely.”

If Katze was surprised at the Blondie’s sentiment, he didn’t show it. Instead, he turned and stepped through the portal.

Katze entered the second bedroom and found Cal staring out the tall, clear glass windows. “I’m back,” he said, instead of asking Cal how he was. It would be a stupid question, because obviously the kid was not okay.

Cal turned, revealing his surprise for a few brief seconds before he wiped his expression again and turned back to the window. “I am relieved to see you are uninjured.”

“Yeah, at least one of us is.” He watched Cal’s back stiffen ever so slightly.

“You know?”

“Raoul only promised not to tell Iason.”

“Ah. An error on my part.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, thank you.”

“Can you tell me what happened with you and Bean then?”

“I’m unsure of his motives, even now, however I should not have let down my guard. I knew he was hiding something...”

Katze stepped forward and dropped his hand on Cal's shoulder, could feel it hard and knotted with tension. "This isn't your fault, Cal."

*This isn't your fault, kid.*

*Katze stared up at the man in uniform that had just found him, covered in blood and wielding a small knife. "Is...he...dead?"*

*The knife was gently removed from his hand, as a blanket or something warm was draped over his shivering, naked shoulders. The man in uniform spoke again.*

*"It's okay kid, we'll take care of it. You got any other relatives? Someone you can stay with?"*

*Katze shook his head. All he had ever know was his father, and the brutality of his father's assaults. "My...I think I had a mother, but she went to live with another man. She said she couldn't take no stupid kid with her. That's what Papa said. He said she left because of me, because I made her leave, but I didn't mean it."*

*He looked at the strange scene before him, his father, lying at an odd angle on the filthy floor, blood covering his chest and neck, as his flaccid dick draped over the trousers he had lowered to rape his son. Then Katze looked at his own bare chest and arms, covered in blood and bruises. What was real? Was this real? Would his father just wake up and attack him again, or was it really over this time?*

*"I'm hungry," he decided, rose and shrugged off the officer's coat and walked naked to the cupboard to retrieve a package of instant pasta mix. "I have to eat before he wakes up or he won't let me have any."*

*A hand fell on his shoulder, he shrieked and scrambled backwards into a corner between the dirty kitchen and ramshackle living area. No more. No more. He couldn't take it anymore!*

*"Are you okay?"*



Katze blinked and realized that Cal was talking to him, had been talking to him while he'd been pulled into that horrific memory of his past. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said, even as he pulled Cal into his arms. The boy immediately began to struggle.

"No! You mustn't."

"Why?"

"Because I can't...please stop."

"If you want to scream, scream. If you want punch me, kick me, bite me, then go ahead, and if you need to cry then do that, but get it out Cal or you will never move past it."

"Don't do this. Don't do..." A sob tore from him and Cal covered his mouth horrified. "P...Please, Katze. Please, it...I'll break. Please..."

Katze only tightened his hold. "You won't break. You're made of stronger stuff than that." He felt Cal trembling in his arms as he fought the tears and understood all too well how painful it was for him; how ashamed, out of control and frightened he was. "I won't let you break. Just hang on to me and let it out. Get it over and done with."

"I...mustn't..." Cal broke before he could finish the sentence. He sobbed and wailed and struggled and cried and screamed until he was hoarse, as he relieved the horror of those three men raping him. He wept and he cursed and he pounded Katze's hard, firm chest until his hands were numb, and then he let himself be lowered to the bed and clung to his only source of support. The screams lowered to a moan and then a whimper; the sobs to hiccups and then painfully silent tears. The fists that had hurt Katze now gripped his shirt in desperation.

Katze continued to hold Cal as tightly as when he began, and battled tears of his own. He wished he could find those men and take his time torturing and killing them, but he knew that wasn't the answer. He had gotten away with murder once before, but the law would not be as forgiving this time.

Eventually Cal's anger and despair turned to submission and defeat. He felt the tension in the young man's body slowly ease, then his body grew slack, and finally, Cal's breathing evened out and his movements and tears ceased.

Katze gently lay Cal back on the bed, carefully extracted himself and then pulled a cover over the exhausted Furniture. He sat on the edge of the bed, stared at the pale, tear stained cheeks of the sleeping boy before him and wished with all his heart that the past could be changed.

"You'll be okay," he promised softly as he pushed Cal's hair out of his eyes. "You'll be okay because you have something I didn't, people who care about you." He brushed his fingers over Cal's fevered cheek. "You'll be okay."

\*\*\*\*\*

Riki managed to avoid the advisors continued efforts to get him to make some sort of contribution or decision regarding ruling of the Kingdom by taking advantage of Yiel's willingness to tend on him. She took him and Iason on a full tour of the palace and surrounding areas. He liked the gardens best, and the flowered glen where a small pond lay nearly hidden by a grove of tall trees. The air here smelled different from Amoī, cleaner, fresher.

Yiel answered all his questions about the Humaritans, which was what the locals called themselves. She explained their history, of how the first Humans had traveled from a dying Earth over a millennia ago to settle on this planet which they called Avalon, named for an ancient mythical kingdom in Earth's past literature.

The first settlers were had read such stories about Arthur Pendragon and his brave knights, and had decided to adapt their ways to that simpler, noble way of life. It had taken them a half a century to integrate themselves with the natives, who had been a xenophobic and untrusting race that preferred to hunt for their food, which they consumed raw. It was decades more before The Aritans agreed to the suggested changes in their environment

and culture that would allow for crops, fruits and other sorts of natural, food sources.

Still, it was not until nearly two centuries later, after much of the population were now so intermingled it was impossible to tell a Human from an Aritan, with the dominant color of the native's overwhelming the Earth settlers and leading to darker skin and eyes for everyone, that a monarchy system started to develop

The Humans, with their love of the Arthurian times, and the Artians, who seemed a modest, simple race who hadn't understood the concept of unity, as it had always been everyone for themselves elected firstly a chancellor, and then a High chancellor and finally a King and Queen. The King and Queen ruled, but they had many advisors to help them do so, and also each individual had a say in how things should be done. They considered the needs of rights of their people above all else, and so a comfortable, stable environment was created that left no one man without work, or no one child to go hungry.

Now the Humaritans live contentedly, using only the planet resources that could be recycled back into the planet to accommodate their way of life. Their lessons of First Earth had been learned and ingrained, passed down through the centuries to a people who would not make those same mistakes. They found rewards for their considerations of the planet, and as their bodies adapted to the types of foods they could grow here, the mixture of these two races developed special skills, that the Arthurian legend would call magic. Each was individual in their power, some could only do simple tricks, while others could cause flowers to grow from hard rock, or create a barrier against a deadly rockslide. Their simple and logical need to procreate had and breed outside their own species, allowed the evolution of a powerful, intelligent and noble race.

Riki was walking back with Iason to his chambers. It had already been two days, and the Queen still had not awoken, and yet in those two days he had learned so much about the people and planet he came from. He had listened carefully as Yielā explained their laws and governing principles. He watched with wonder when she showed him how the seeds were sewn into the dirt and then made to rise less than a few days later.

He learned of the people who worked the land and loved the land. There was not one complaint, not from anyone, about how much or how little they had. Everyone was fed, everyone was happy and content. Avalon, was Eden, a paradise that he had been stolen from and it stuck deep in his craw when he remembered how many nights he had gone hungry, how many times he had battled to stay awake in Guardian to avoid getting pummeled in his sleep, or worse, spirited away never to be seen again. All the times he'd had to sell himself, because he had nothing else of value.

It hurt. It burned and it scraped inside his chest and caused such a wedge of pressure in his head he almost couldn't breathe. To have a life without bartering sex. To be able to be with a woman and raise a family, to have children and to have the ability to feed those children and clothe them and watch them grow. It burned. Oh dear God how it scorched him.

"Is there anything else you would care to see, today, Maku?"

"No. When will the Queen wake up?" He asked this question several times a day and as she always did, Yielia responded in the same way.

"Soon, Maku."

"We have to leave tomorrow night," he stated quietly as they reached his chambers. "You know that right?"

"You truly will not stay, Maku?" Her voice was riddled with sadness.

"I can't. I can't stay."

She nodded, and for the first time since Riki had known her, looked tired.

"I will do what I can to ensure that her Majesty awakens before you go."

"I'd appreciate that." Riki moved to the door, and suddenly noticed there were no guards stationed outside of it. "Where are the guards?"

"We have confirmed that all the aliens have been captured, Maku,"

Riki nodded and stepped into the room, but when he turned he saw that Iason and Yielia did not move across the threshold. “What are you doing?”

“I...cannot enter,” Iason stated, annoyed. He was astonished that he could lift neither hand nor foot towards the opening, it was as if he was paralyzed from moving. He took a step back, then a step forward again and the same thing happened.

“A seal has been placed on your door so that only those who you give permission may enter,” Yielia explained. “So that you might have some privacy with your companion, without others overhearing your words.”

“Fascinating.” Iason continued to step backwards, and then sideways, and then forward. Regardless of how he approached, he could not get through the door. “How is it done? Is this more of your magic? Is there a technique or...?”

“Iason, just come in!” Riki snapped and was startled as the Blondie, who was too busy asking questions to pay attention, suddenly stumbled over the threshold, as if he was pushed from behind. “What happened?”

Yielia smiled. “The pulling force comes only after the initial permission, you will not feel it again once you have crossed.”

Iason straightened and stepped back out of the room, then back inside. “She’s right. I feel nothing like before, it is as if the seal has gone.”

“That’s just weird,” Riki muttered, feeling odd to suddenly have such control. “So, you’re saying if I hadn’t said he could come in, he would never be able to?”

Yielia nodded. “That is correct.”

“Can you reset the seal?”

“Riki!” Iason growled, hoping that the mongrel was only joking and that he wasn’t really thinking of keeping him out. “I would find a way inside, and then there would be punishment.”

“Yeah, yeah, but how long would it take you?” Riki retorted and then to Yiela. “Can you put that kind of thing around the bed?”

“Riki!”

Yiela realized that their jibes were some sort of teasing and she smiled again. “I am afraid it can only be used for doors or windows.”

“Oh. Well, shit, there goes that idea.” Riki yelped as Iason slapped him hard across the ass. “Ow! Mother fucker!”

This time Yiela laughed. “I can see you are in good hands. Would you like me to arrange some food to be brought to you? They will, of course, leave it outside the chamber, unless you invite them in.”

“Is there not an Earth legend about a creature who cannot enter one’s home unless invited?” Iason queried.

“A Vampire,” she replied. “Though I think this seal is for other purposes.”

“Yiela,”

She turned to Riki. “Yes, Maku.”

“You can come in...too.”

While she did not stumble as Iason did, perhaps because she was prepared, there was a subtle jerk as she stepped over. “Thank you, Maku.”

“Yeah, and now that you’re in, can you leave? I need to be alone for awhile.” He glanced up at Iason who raised an eyebrow. “You don’t count.”

“Well, thank you kindly.”

Yiela nodded. “I will return when there is news of the Queen. Sweet dreams, Maku.” She pulled the two large doors closed as she left and then Iason immediately folded Riki in his arms.

“Tell me what is wrong.”

Riki shook his head but didn't pull away. Of course Iason would have seen through his charade, Iason knew him like no one else did. "Do me."

Iason didn't hesitate, he picked the smaller man up bodily and carried him over to the massive bed. Their clothes hit the floor moments later and soon they were entwined in the familiar dance of lovemaking.

It had been a while for both of them, and while Iason was trying to be gentle, Riki moaned and twisted beneath him as if trying to exorcize a demon. When he entered Riki, the young man pushed back brutally hard, nearly impaling himself on Iason's cock.

"Riki?"

"Hurt me," Riki whispered as he buried his face in the pillow. "Please, I need it. Hurt me."

"As you wish." Iason allowed his own needs to take over and began thrusting into Riki with abandon. All façade of gentleness had been removed and replaced by the cold, hard, unforgiving nature that was the true Iason Mink.

Riki screamed through the pain, and then demanded more. He needed to feel something other than this utter waste that was his life. Pain that could be physically felt could also be managed, and it was through this pain that he finally allowed himself a release on his emotions and began to grieve. He grieved for the parents he had never known and for the reality of what his life could have been, here on Avalon instead of how he had grown up on Amoï. He grieved for being taken away from a life that was good and decent and left to rot as a mongrel on the streets of Ceres.

He grieved for Guy, who was the closest thing he'd had to family and a real friend. Guy had been everything to him at one time, a subordinate, a friend, a lover, a brother, a teammate and a bodyguard. But, it had not been enough. Isn't that why he had gone looking for Iason so many years ago?

He had forgiven Guy for what he had done, but he could not forgive himself. He had wanted more, thought he deserved more and his greed and

arrogance had led him to chase after a Blondie. He deserved the life of a pet, because he had been so stupid, so selfish. Everything, finally everything from his old, miserable life was gone, he'd cast aside the last of it when he'd said a final goodbye to Guy. Still, the notion of what could have been, here on Avalon ate at him and infested his heart, his mind and his soul.

Iason listened to Riki's now quiet, heart-wrenching sobs, mixed with the occasional cry of pain or frustration, and when he felt Riki could take no more of the physical agony, and had fully purged the demons chasing him, Iason delivered pleasure, slow and steady but intense enough to wipe away the pain he had caused.

He touched, licked and stroked Riki until the mongrel was moaning with desire, gasping for release. He brought Riki to the very height of completion, then denied him, only to build the moment again and again with different types of stimulation that he knew from experience drove his lover wild. Yes, he knew Riki's body almost as well as his own and he explored and exploited every inch of it now

It was an ongoing process, learning to properly care for his pet, Riki's moods were still so very random that it was difficult to judge certain situations, but he was making progress. While his tendencies still ran towards the need of making Riki cry and beg on occasion, lately Iason preferred to hear his lover gasp in pleasure than whimper against discomfort.

After they were both spent, Iason continued to hold Riki in his arms and caress his hair. "Better?" he asked and Riki slowly nodded. "Riki?"

"Hmmm?"

Iason could hear the exhaustion in the mongrel's voice and knew his love would be off to sleep in a few seconds.

"Do you truly wish to stay here?"



His voice sleep, his words slightly slurred, Riki gave his answer and Iason remained awake beside him throughout the night to consider the meaning behind it all.

Iason's sensors clicked on from the sound of footsteps outside the chamber door and a moment later there was a knock on the door. His eyes opened, he noticed that the sky outside the windows had grown dark; they had been sleeping several hours.

"Maku, I am sorry to disturb you," Yiel's voice came from the other side of the door as Iason rose and slipped on his trousers. He pulled the door open and she smiled at him.

"The Queen has awakened."

He nodded and moved back to the bed to rouse his lover. Riki dressed quickly and then they both followed Yiel through the quiet hallways of the palace; it seemed everyone else had retired as well.

They stepped up to a chamber with gold trimmed doors, where two palace guards stood. They stepped aside as Riki approached, but before he could open the door, it was pulled free from the other side and Alistair and several others stepped through.

"Ah, Maku, we have been speaking with her majesty and..."

"I told you to wait," Yiel insisted. "The Prince was to be the first to speak with her."

"We understand, however as the Prince has not seen fit to deal with the rising issues at hand we were forced to..."

"Alistair," a firm, regal voice said from inside the room. "You are dismissed."

Alistair turned back to the room and bowed quickly. "As you say, my Queen." He hurried off then without even a backwards glance at Riki.

"I am sorry..." Yiel began and Riki waved her words away.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, suddenly finding himself nervous about facing the Queen. “I get that they needed to talk to her too.”

Yiela nodded and waved him through, but put her hand up as Iason moved to follow. “Please, she wishes to speak to him alone.”

“No.”

“Iason.”

Iason looked at Riki, could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

“I need to do this...alone. Please.”

Iason nodded and caressed Riki’s cheek. “I will be right here should you require my presence.”

“Yeah, okay.” Riki allowed himself to move into the Blondie’s touch for a very brief moment, before he stepped into the chamber and the door closed behind him.

Inside, was a bed very much like his own, only curtained in shades of gold and green. The Queen sat upon the bed, covered with a soft blanket. Her long, beautiful hair was loose for the first time, and fell about her face and shoulders like a wave of delicate raven feathers.

Celestia smiled as he appeared at her bed, and lifted her hand towards him. “Will you sit?” she asked and was pleased that, while he did not take her hand, he settled facing her on the bed. “Are you well? Were you injured, from before?”

Riki thought about the knife wound in his arm, which had been completely healed by the medical droid on Jupiter’s ship. “I’m fine.”

“I am pleased you are well.”

“Yeah.”

“I am also pleased you kept your promise and stayed.”

Riki's eyes shifted uncomfortably. "Only until you woke up," he said. "I leave tomorrow." For an instant, when he saw the devastation mar her beautiful face he wished he could retract his words, but it was pointless to pretend that he could stay.

"Is that your choice or the choice of your master?" she asked quietly.

"Mine," he lied, and then felt as if someone had kicked him in the gut. "Mostly."

She signed, heavily. "I cannot fault you for it. We have treated you reprehensibly. It was my fault, for not seeing that man...that thing for what it was."

"It doesn't matter." Riki didn't want to talk about the King, or the alien that pretended to be King. He didn't want to see that scene of his father being eaten again, and besides, dead was dead. Talking about or laying blame didn't change that. "Are you...okay?"

She smiled tiredly. "I am still very weak, but I will recover in no time."

"You....you said that you used your...um...the spell to ward off death, or something. What did you mean?"

"Your..." She bit her lip and shook her head. "That thing tried to end my life when I challenged him after you escaped. He was being unreasonable and had even called for Yiel's arrest. I knew then that he was not the man I married." She sighed again. "Perhaps I had always known and was too afraid to admit it, to admit that I had lost not only both my children, but my dear husband as well. My grief made me blind to what he was, and put you in danger, put us all in danger." She reached for his hand, not very surprised when he pulled it back and slid it into his jacket pocket before she could touch it. "I am sorry, Riki."

He shrugged. "It's fine." He paused for a moment, digesting her words and trying to organize his own thoughts. There was so much he wanted to ask her, and yet part of him felt ashamed to do so, as if asking would make him appear weak, or stupid. "You said...children? So, you have another son?"

“No. I had a daughter, your sister. I was with child when you were taken, but she passed away some years ago.”

“How?”

“She fell down a well.” Celestia smirked. “Irony is it not? Both of my children were taken from me while I was not with them. Perhaps it is better that I can have no more. I do not appear to be a very adept at motherhood.”

Her statement tore at Riki and he didn't even understand why. “That's not true!” he said before he could pull the words back. When she looked at him, puzzled, he forced himself to continue. “I mean...you seem like a...a nice person and I don't think you could be bad at anything.”

She blinked. “I believe that is the nicest compliment I have ever received, thank you, Riki.”

Riki flushed and looked away again.

“I'm sure you have many questions, and since our time is limited, perhaps you should ask them.”

“Is it okay?” He met her gaze again. “I mean, you're tired and...”

“Yes, I am, but as you are leaving the least I can do is give you what answers I can.”

He nodded and scowled as he tried to organize his thoughts into what he needed to know first.

“So, the King, why did he want me?”

“I have only a theory, and cannot be certain it is the true cause.”

“Anything's better than nothing.”

“True. To understand my theory, I'll need to explain about the Vilipshine, I assume that you have never encountered them before?”

“No.”

“I see.” She paused and indicated the pitcher of water next to her bed. “Could you pour me a drink please, I am afraid my throat is rather dry from my sleep.”

Riki poured her a glass, waited as she drank it down, then set the empty glass back on the bedside table.

“The Vilipshine are a difficult enemy to battle,” she began. “They are like an infection, spreading their disease throughout the galaxy. They can disguise themselves as Humans and integrate themselves into a population, as you have seen. With this they can learn the species’ strengths and weaknesses, and steal their technology. They consume the life force of others, and so each planet that they conquer, once they have the information they desire, they feast on the population. The more evolved Vilipshine only drain a person’s life energy, the lower Vilipshine feast on the bodies themselves. They then rape the planet and destroy whatever natural resources are available, before moving on to their next target.”

“So, they might never have been caught, here I mean?” Riki asked. “If I hadn’t realized...”

“Yes and no. I believe over time we would have noticed, but again I blame myself for ignoring the signs that I did see. You must understand that while the Vilipshine are a cold, barbaric race, their emotions are different from ours, and stem mostly from anger, greed and lust. This often makes their integration methods unsuccessful, depending on the species, and so they in recent decades that have been exposed early enough that a population was able to fight back and get rid of them.”

“Oh, so, like what finally happened here?”

“Yes, exactly. Due to this flaw in their genetic makeup, they have been searching for a way to combat their lack of what we shall call softer emotions. When they absorb the life force from another, they also inherit their memories, but not their emotions. Then, as I explained the lower hoards consume the body for nourishment.”

“I still don't understand why he was so intent on getting me? He wanted my life force, my body?”

“No, my dear. He wanted your power, or the power he suspected you had.”

“I don't *have* any power!”

Riki growled and rose from the bed, agitated. “I'm a mongrel from Ceres. If anyone had less power they would be dead.”

“You do have power, Riki.”

“*What* power?” The notion was impossible. He would know if he had something like that, right? If he had power he would have been able to escape Ceres without becoming the pet of a Blondie. He would have been able to escape Iason without having to barter with Guy's life. He was utterly useless!

“With my race, every child is born with a special gift, some are gentle and rarely used, others are strong and vibrant gifts, and most have a specific ability that is unlike that of their peers.”

“Yiela said your people genetically started having some kind of power after years of mating and living here. Is that what you mean? Stuff like the mind control and shit, because I promise you I cannot do that!”

She smiled sadly. “No, Riki. The Humatarians have developed certain mental skills, it is true, but I am not Humartarian. Do you not remember my telling you that I come from a warrior race and that Nathaniel bought me and freed me from my owner decades ago?”

Riki stared at her. Okay, so, wait. He was only half Humatarian then? This was so confusing. “I...don't get it.”

“Every few thousand years, one of my people develops a power beyond all the others that had come before. Mine was the power of war, which is why I was never defeated in battle. It is also why I was stolen from my home world to be put into the games.”

“But...”

“You also have a power, Riki, and I suspect that yours is the power of love. The power to bring people together, to mediate peace in the face of war, and also the power to make others trust and care for you.”

Riki blinked. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” She patted the bed and he cautiously settled next to her. “The Velipishine wanted this power because they believed it would make their integration into other worlds easier to conquer. It would give them a means to initiate ‘softer emotions’ and would eliminate the threat of being exposed.”

“That’s impossible. I’m telling you, I have no power! I’ve never seen anything to prove...”

“Are you so certain, Riki? Is there nothing in your past, not a single time when it seemed the impossible has happened, or perhaps you stopped something from happening?”

“What? No. I’m telling you there...”

He stopped suddenly and remembered what had happened outside the palace when Guy and Iason were fighting, something had caused everyone to fall down and him to lose consciousness. Iason had claimed it was some kind of energy that came from Riki, but that was impossible and must have been some weird thing the king had put on him.

“Have you ever come through death to the other side and not understood how you got there?” Celestia continued. “Have you ever been so very angry and desperate to save someone you cared for that their enemies mysteriously vanished?”

Riki stared at her as more thoughts entered his head. Orphe. He remembered how scared he had been when he’d been captured by Orphe. He had managed to escape, only to find Iason had come after him. Orphe had intended to kill Iason and the thought had terrified him. He’d seen

Orphe getting away on a ship, and had picked up a laser rifle, he'd aimed it at the ship, so full of hate for the Blondie and fear for Iason that a surge of rage surrounded through him. And when he fired, he saw the bright flash of light and then the startling effect as the ship exploded before his eyes. He had lost consciousness almost immediately afterwards, and yet, now that he thought of it, there was no way that a shot from a blaster would do that kind of damage. He had been too far away and his vision was blurry at best because he was still feeling the effects of the drugs and his injuries at the time. If that were true, then why had the shuttle exploded?

As he tried to make sense of it, another scene came into his mind, a scene where he had walked into a burning building, prepared to die beside a Blondie who was trapped there. He'd settled beside Iason, they shared a final smoke, one filled with poison that would at least allow him a quiet, painless death, and he had....awakened in a healing chamber some months later.

No. How was that possible? Again he searched his memory for the cause. He and Iason had died, or should have. The building had been burning and would have dropped atop them, burying them beneath it.

***There was this weird green bubble, and you and Iason were in the center of it.***

Katze's words came back to him, the words the man had shared when Riki had asked how he and Iason had survived the fire. They had both assumed that it had been Jupiter that had saved them, but how could she have when they were in a place where no signal could reach? She was still just an AI after all, and had to have access to a signal for any kind of reaction.

Riki paled and ran a hand through his hair. A green bubble around them. A green flash just before Orphe's shuttle exploded and then a third...a third when Guy and Iason had been fighting. Could that....that power had really come from him?

"It's...not possible." He lifted his eyes to the Queen who was watching him concerned. "How...how is that possible? How could I have that kind of power and not know it?"



“Had you been brought up here, you would have been trained to control it properly from a young age,” she advised softly. “Initially the gift is always triggered by something, a power emotion or a stressful situation. Can you think of when that might have been?”

If he was remembering correctly then the first time would have been at Dana Bahn, when he thought Iason was going to die. “I...I think maybe, yeah.”

She nodded and reached for his hand, pleased that this time he allowed her to take it. “Your gift must only reveals itself when your love, or when those you love are threatened. At the same time, when it is dormant, we shall say, it draws others to you.”

Riki tried to wrap his head around all of it, it was so strange, the concept and the reality. What did it all mean? How could he be so in the dark about everything? Wait, she said the power caused others to be drawn to him. Did that mean that Guy and Iason loved him only because they were compelled to?

“No,” Celestia replied, reading his expression. “There are people who will gravitate to you, who will desire your respect and wish to be around you, but true love cannot be forced. If someone loves you, it is because of who you are, not the power you hold.”

“This is...so much. It’s all too much.”

She nodded, squeezed his hand and then released it to sit back. “It is and I am sorry for that. Could I trouble you for some water, there on the stand?”

Riki rose and poured some water from the pitcher on the bed table into a crystal goblet. He returned to the bed and handed it to her, but remained standing. He watched her sip the water delicately, and realized how pale she looked, compared to the other times he had seen her. Her hand shook slightly as she gripped the glass and he felt a snag of guilt in his gut as he remembered her attack on the King.

Yiela had said something about the Queen using up too much energy after her spell to save her own life. She had used that energy to save his life, someone she didn't even know.

"I...owe you," he muttered and felt the usual spike of nausea and anger that always accompanied that fact. He hated owing people.

Celestia lowered the glass and watched him quietly. "I beg your pardon?"

"I owe you."

"What do you owe me?"

"For that." He shrugged, uneasily and shoved his hands in his jacket pocket. "For keeping that thing from taking...whatever he was gonna take from me." His gaze hardened "So, now I owe you and you have to tell me what you want."

"What I want?"

"I don't like owing people, so just pick something so we can get it over with."

She finished her water and offered him the empty glass, which he placed back on the bed table. "Is this how you lived until now? Doing favors for others to get what you want? Bargaining and trading..." What could he possibly have traded? The report they had received about their son's life had been brief, but grim, and most Humans on Amoï lived in squalor. "Exactly did you bargain with, Riki?"

Usually Riki wasn't ashamed of how he'd been forced to survive in Ceres before Iason, and technically, he was still using his body to stay with the Blondie; not that he really had a choice. However, for some reason, he felt shame saying it aloud to this woman, this woman that he knew yet didn't remember. It made no sense.

"The only thing I had," he stated bluntly, turned and stormed over to the windows, furious at himself for what he was feeling, for showing weakness.

“I’m not condemning you,” she said softly from her bed. “You’ve had a difficult life, I am not ignorant of that. I am only trying to understand why you feel you must owe me anything.”

“If you do something for me, I do something for you. That’s how it works.”

“Has no one ever done anything for you without expecting something in return?”

“No.”

“Not even the android?”

“No.”

“Because you belong to him? You feel you do not have to give anything in return because he is your master?”

Riki turned back to her, defiantly. “I do give him something. I let him fuck me whenever he wants.”

Celestia didn’t even flinch, and Riki wondered if she had finally become accustomed to his mongrel ways.

“If that is really all there is to it, I do not understand why you are fighting so hard to stay at his side.”

Because he gave his word, Riki thought, and because Iason had spared Guy not once but twice, apparently, when he could have easily killed him. Plus, he’d brought Cal back, when Riki really wanted the furniture back, and he was still letting him work and develop his skills. So Iason had given him a lot, but aside from that, the Elite would chase him no matter where he went, so it was easier to stay.

“My reasons are none of your business. I owe him so I stay with him. That’s all there is too it.”

“Yet, I may not request the same in return?”

Did she mean for him to stay here? It wasn't that simple. He and Iason had gone through a lot to get to the place they were at now, the place where he chose to stay not because he had to, but because he wanted to. His feelings for Iason were complicated, and someone like her would never understand them. He didn't even understand them most of the time. Aside from that, Jupiter would never allow him to stay, she had made that very clear.

"No."

Celestia sighed heavily. "What about for love?"

"Huh?"

"Could I not have simply protected you out of love?"

"I don't understand," he admitted.

"Will you sit again, here beside me?"

He hesitated, but in the end complied and even allowed her to take both his hands.

"I love you."

"Is this because of the power thing, because I'm still not really sure about..."

"I have already explained that your power can make people care about you but not love you. I love you because I am your Mother and you are my son."

"I still don't get that."

"I know, and I have no other way of explaining it or proving it to you."

"I don't need you to prove anything," he returned, shaking his head. "I just..." In his heart he did recognize her as his mother, but having never had either parent he simply couldn't grasp the concept of that sort of relationship. He shrugged, unable to put his thoughts into words.

“If I do something for you,” Celestia continued, “I do it because I love you, because you are my son, and for reason alone and no other. I do not expect compensation for my love.”

Riki lowered his eyes and shifted uncomfortably. She was confusing him, he didn't understand what she was saying and he pulled his hands away. “That's not how it works.” She couldn't love him, she didn't even know him. Besides, he was a mongrel and a pet. He was nothing to her. Iason and Guy were the only people who had ever cared about him, but even they wanted something from him.

“Tell me why you stay with the android?” Celestia requested, seeing that she had disturbed him and trying to redirect their conversation to a safer topic.

“His name is Iason.”

“Very well, tell me why you stay with Iason.”

“I...he...” What could he say? What lies would work in his favor? Even as he thought such things he felt a prickling in his chest that seemed to scream at him be truthful with her. Well, what the hell, he wasn't ever going to see her again after today, so what did it matter? And Iason couldn't hear them through the walls, probably.

“I belong to him.”

“There is more to it than that, is there not? I have witnessed your stubbornness and temper and find it difficult to believe you allow anyone to tether you that way.”

Riki shrugged. “He helps me focus.”

“Focus?”

“Yeah, on things I need to focus on, instead of getting into trouble and sh... stuff.” Which was all he had been doing before he became Iason's pet. “He

takes care of me,” he admitted “I don’t need it, but he does it anyway and I’ve become, used to him, I guess. To him being there.”

“He rapes you?”

“It’s not rape!” At least, it wasn’t anymore. In the past, yes it was, but even in those early times Riki may have been screaming no, but his body had craved Iason’s touch and he had always been rewarded with a great deal of pleasure, eventually. “You don’t understand! Look, I don’t want to talk about Iason.” He rose again. “I owe you, but I can’t stay, in fact we have to leave really soon, so you need to decide what else you want.”

Celestia stared at him. He really couldn’t accept that she protected him out of love? “You cannot give me what I wish, so I will have to consider an alternative.”

Riki didn’t like that, he preferred to have all cards on the table to confirm the deal. “I need to know now, or…”

“Or?”

“I told you, I have to leave soon.”

“Is this how it is done? Both sides confirm the terms before either accepts the reward?”

“Yeah, of course.” Going into a deal blind, without knowing what the other party expected could lead to disaster. He’d been foolish enough to do that once, and he paid the price. He would never make that mistake again.

“Very well. I would like to hold you.”

Riki’s eyes widened and he stepped back, startled. He honestly hadn’t expected her to ask for that, Iason would flip..

“Well? Do we have an accord, Riki?”

“I’ve only been with a woman once, and it was really quick, so…”

Celestia blinked, “I beg your pardon?”

“Sex. I’ve only tried it on a female once,” he explained as he tried not to think about the repercussions that had awaited him after he’d slept with Mimea. If you could even call it that, He’d just put it in her when they had been caught and he’d been dragged back to Iason. “I mean, I know the basics, it’s all kinda the same, I’m just saying it may not be very enjo...” His words died as the Queen released a short giggle, then another, and then in fell into full-blown laughter. “Don’t fucking laugh at me! The ratio of men and women in Ceres is...”

The Queen laughed even harder, bordering on hysteria before collapsing back onto the mound of pillows behind her, struggling to catch her breath. “Oh...Oh my,” she gasped as she wiped tears away from her eyes. If it wasn’t so tragic, it would indeed be laughable. She immediately sobered and the softest sob escaped before she buried her face behind her hands.

Holy shit? Was she crying? Why was she crying? Riki glanced around, nervously, expecting the guards to burst in and start beating him for making the Queen cry. She was laughing just a moment ago, what the hell was wrong with her?

“S...stop,” he demanded, hesitantly, and when she continued to weep, he reluctantly sat beside her again. What should he do? He had no idea what to do with a lamenting woman. He started to pat her trembling shoulder, then reconsidered and pulled his hand back. Listening to her was making his chest hurt and he didn’t understand why. “Please stop.”

“I...apologize,” Celestia said as she allowed her hands to drop away and revealed a tearful, but still beautiful face. “This is my fault. None of this should have happened to you. All of it is my fault.”

How could it be her fault? Were all the women here incapable of making sense, or was it just women in general? Mimea had shown little sense either, she was shallow and somewhat stupid, but Riki had really wanted to fuck with Iason. That was the only reason he’d even gone near the girl, but now it seemed that no females had any sense.

Riki glanced around helplessly, spotted a cloth pearl water basin in the corner and walked over to wet one of the soft cloths beside it. He brought it back and shoved it at her. "Here."

"Thank you," She politely wiped at her face and sniffed. "I must look a sight."

Riki shrugged, shoved his hands back into his pockets again. "Who cares?" he returned. "You should look how you want not how anyone else wants you to."

She lifted her face to look at him, and slowly smiled. "Yes. I suppose you're right." She wiped at her face again, held the cloth to it and breathed in, before moving it away again and clearing her throat. "I did not intend for us to fornicate, Riki. You are my son, and that would not only be wrong it would be..." She tried to think of another word he might understand.

He smirked and sat back on the bed. "Disgusting?"

She released a gentle chuckle. "Yes, I suppose so."

"But...you said you wanted me to hold you. Where I come from that means sex."

"I see. Well, here it simply means that you would allow me to put my arms around you and hold you. An embrace, only an embrace. It is not sexual, it is more...comforting." She lifted her hand and brushed it over his hair, disappointed when he pulled away. "We often cuddled when you were a child. You loved to climb into my lap and would fall asleep playing with my hair."

Riki froze, then stood suddenly. He did that with Iason sometimes, fell asleep in the Blondie's arms while playing with Iason's hair. Was...was that something he'd learned from her? Was he remembering her or was it coincidence?

Celestia sighed. "But I understand now that it would make you uncomfortable, so I'm afraid you will just have to wait until I think of



something else.”

Riki nodded slowly. He wouldn't push her for an answer again, this conversation had already gotten beyond strange.

“I am sorry also that I cannot speak with you any longer, I need more rest.”

“But...I have to leave soon!”

“I know, and we will talk again before then, I promise you. For now, you need time to digest what I have said and come to your own conclusions.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

She smiled again, but her eyes were already starting to droop. “You are who you believe yourself to be, my darling,” she said softly. “Anything else is simply extra seasoning to the flavor you have mastered.”

“You sound like Iason,” Riki said as he rose from the bed.

“Hmmm, I will take that as...a compliment.”

A moment later the Queen was asleep. Riki watched her for a long moment, at war with himself and all that she had told him. Finally, he reached forward and pulled the blanket around her, then quietly turned and left the room.

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Iason watched Riki as they walked quietly back to what was the Prince's chambers. The mongrel had said nothing about what he discussed with the Queen and Iason was getting impatient. He had hoped that once Riki had seen the Queen they could leave this place, head back to Amoï and get back to the normal order of things. When Riki suddenly stopped a few metres from the room, and then suddenly turned and walked in the other direction, Iason scowled and followed.

“Riki?”

Riki didn't speak he just continued to walk two sets of stairs, through another corridor and then put into the gardens.

Riki appeared to favor the atriums in Eos, so Iason believed his lover was simply needing some place similar to clear his head, but when Riki continued on through the gardens and down another walkway that Iason did not recall being part of the tour Yiela had given them, he wondered where the young man was going.

Curious, he followed Riki as they left the path and came to a rose covered archway, bordered by a six-foot high stone, wall on either side. Two guards who stood by the Archway stood bowed at their approach.

“Maku, this is a restricted area. It is not permitted to...”

“Let him pass.”

Iason glanced behind them and watched the Captain of the Guard walking towards them. Immediately, he stepped closer to Riki, blocking the man's access.

“I am no threat,” the Captain stated raising a hand peacefully. “The Queen has ordered that the Prince will have free access to anywhere he wishes to go.”

“So, you're not one of them,” Riki said, finally speaking.

The Captain removed his helmet and bowed sharply from the waist. “You are within your rights to have me dismissed from my position, Maku, or to have me executed. It is my responsibility to detect such threats, and yet I allowed the Vilipshine to infiltrate the palace. Such an act cannot be forgiven.”

Riki snorted. “You people sure seem eager to die.”

“That is not the case, Maku, I assure you. In reality we have not used the execution chambers for over a century, but treason is treason and...”

“Why is this place restricted?” Riki demanded, cutting him off. He didn’t know what was beyond the archway; he knew only that something was drawing him there.

The Captain exchanged a look with the other two guards, before speaking. “It is the Queen’s Wood, Maku. No one has been permitted inside of it since...”

“Since I was taken and the King killed,” Riki finished. The grief he saw on the Captain’s face was real and it allowed Riki to forgive the man a little. “I need to see it.”

“Of course.” The Captain waived the two guards aside. “I will accompany you...”

“I don’t need you to...”

“Please, Maku. It is a disturbing place, ripe with memory. I will not stop you going, but I cannot allow you to go alone.”

Riki stared at the Captain for a moment, then he looked up at Iason, who for once was not intruding or being overprotective. “I’m not alone,” he said to the Captain, but his eyes never left Iason’s.

“No,” the Blondie agreed and set his hand on Riki’s shoulder. “Never.”

“As you command,” the Captain replied and stood his ground as the android and his prince stepped through the archway.

They continued down a stone pathway until stone became a dirt trail and the trail opened to a wide, lush glen of tall, green grass and wild flowers.

“It is very still,” Iason commented as he looked around the glen. He couldn’t pick up any trace of wildlife, not even a bird nearby or a rodent in the fields. “But very well-tended.”

At the very center of the field was a tall marble statue of a young boy and at its base a poem was etched. Riki didn’t have the heart to read it, he suspected it was about the death of a child, his death.

“It was here,” Riki said so quietly that Iason almost didn’t hear him. His expected the pain in his head to hit first, the sign of the memory to come, as they all had before, but instead the past simply slipped into his mind, like a soft summer breeze. “We were eating and playing games.”

He walked past the memorial, to the very spot where the man....where his father had sat with him. He crouched and touched the grass, as if expecting to still feel the warmth from his father’s presence.

The sound of a child’s laughter suddenly echoed around them, and Iason spun around, startled. “What was that?”

“Me,” Riki whispered, having heard himself in the past. These people were capable of magic and powers he could not understand, it did not seem so strange that the planet itself might also be just as strange.

The Captain had said the woods were ripe with memory, and Riki was unsure if what they heard was a ghost of his past or if he himself was projecting it and this place was absorbing that feeling from him.

He rose and felt his stomach knot as he walked towards the tree line, remembering the feel of his father’s arms around him as they ran, the smell of sweat and fear he could now recall as he moved closer. “It was there,” he said and felt rather than heard Iason walk up behind him.

“You don’t have to do this, Riki,” Iason said as he set two hands on Riki’s trembling shoulders. “You have spoken with the Queen, done what you needed to do, so let us leave this place and all of this unpleasantness behind us.”

“I have to know all of it.”

“It is distressing you.”

“Yeah.” Riki allowed himself to lean back against Iason, felt the Blondie’s strong arms circle around him. It would be so easy to walk away, to let himself be taken care of by Iason and go back to what he knew on Amoï. “I have to know.”

Iason squeezed him hard then stepped back and slid their hands together. “Then we shall do so together.”

They stepped into the trees and Riki continued to walk, his steps growing heavier the further inside they went. To Iason, all the trees looked the same, but he sensed that Riki would know the spot he was looking for.

When Riki stopped abruptly and gasped, Iason realized they had come to that dreaded spot. His fingers curled tighter around Riki’s and he said.

“Will you tell me?”

Riki pulled in a shaky breath and stared up at the tree, which reached so far into the sky. “We...we ran in here. I didn’t know why, but I guess it was those...things. I remember seeing a ship of some kind before Pa...before we ran.”

Iason’s arm slid around Riki’s shoulder as he stared up at the tree and thought he heard the sound of people running, of breath panting; the sound and smell of fear.

“He told me to climb. To climb and not come back down until he came for me. So I did. I climbed until I couldn’t climb anymore and then I just...sat there and waited.”

“How long?”

Riki shook his head. “I don’t remember, a day, maybe more. I remember the sun going down at least twice and I remember...” He squeezed his eyes shut and turned into Iason’s chest, needing the solidity and familiarity he would find there. “It...it attacked him, here at the base of this tree. He never even had the chance to run, he stayed and waited until I got to the top and then.”

Iason ran his hands up and down Riki’s back. “That’s enough. Don’t do this to yourself, Riki.”

“I did nothing,” he whispered. “I watched that thing...eat him and I did nothing. I stayed in the tree because I was too scared to do anything.”

“Riki, you were so young. You probably did not even understand what you were seeing or what was happening.” He pulled back and cradled Riki’s face in his hands. “There is nothing you could have done.”

“I...should have stayed in the tree. I should have stayed like he told me to...”

“You would have died!” That idea had Iason pulling Riki closer to him again. “How could you wish for that?” If Riki had died as a child he never would have found him, never would have experienced the joy and agony of falling in love with a mongrel.

“It would have been better.” If he had died, it would have been better than growing up in Ceres, then becoming a Blondie’s pet and then feeling so displaced

“No.” Iason crushed Riki too him. “Has it truly been so horrible for you? Do you truly wish that we had never met?”

Riki shook his head and leaned into Iason’s chest. He didn’t have an answer. Sometimes he did think it would have been better, but other times, times like this when it was just him in Iason’s arms...he just didn’t know.

“I love you, Iason,” Riki admitted, honestly and openly, as he stared up at the Blondie. “But I...I can’t go back to being a pet.”

“Are you saying you wish to stay here?” Iason demanded.

Riki recognized the tone in the Blondie’s voice, he had been trained to obey it and for an instant, he opened his mouth to say no, but then firmly closed his mouth with a snap. This was the essence of their relationship, the real essence. Iason was the master and he was the pet. He wanted to believe there was more to it, his heart wanted to think that Iason and he could have a normal relationship, but his mind told him that was impossible.

“I’m...sorry,” he whispered, forcing the words past his lips not because he wasn’t sorry, but because he knew that regardless of what he wanted, this was hurting Iason. “Please understand?”

He waited for the flashing red eyes, the anger and rage, and prepared himself for it, but instead he watched Iason nod and pull him closer again.

“If you wish to stay, I will stay as well.”

“You can’t!” Riki tried to pull back but Iason’s hold was too strong. He struggled. “Iason! We both have to return to Amoi! Jupiter said...”

“Yes, we have to return home.” Iason released his hold but only enough that he could cup Riki’s fearful face. “And we will.”

“But...you just said...” Riki’s words were swallowed as Iason captured his mouth in a sweet, possessive kiss. Riki moaned and felt his arms wrap around Iason of their own volition, effectively chasing away the rest of his distress that the recent memories had caused him,

Iason only released Riki when he knew the mongrel would be too breathless to speak again. “We will return home this evening, and after a time, we will come back to this place, so that you may learn the rest of what you need to know.”

“I...Iason,” Riki managed. Iason couldn’t really want to return here to Avalon. He was a Blondie, an Elite of Tanagura; the leader of the syndicate and favored son of Jupiter. “No.” He stepped back and looked up at Iason. “On Amoï you have respect and power, here...” Here a Blondie was hated and looked down on. Here, Iason would be treated no better than a Mongrel. “You won’t have that here. I know what it’s like to be...to be nothing, to be hated and you don’t understand...”

Iason pulled off his glove and cupped Riki’s chin. “You came from such a place,” he stated quietly, his thumb rubbing against Riki’s cheek. “And every day your strength and pride astounds me. If I must live the life of a Mongrel to be with you, I will do so. I will do anything to stay with you, Riki, because I love you.”

Riki cupped his hand over Iason's larger one, leaned into the Blondie's touch. "Don't do this."

"Do you truly wish to be separated from me?"

"No!"

"Then what else can I do? You have never been happy in Tanagura, and did I not promise you that I would not make you stay there forever?"

"Ye...yeah, but, this is different."

"We said we wanted to run away somewhere, did we not? This planet is lush and green, you like that sort of thing..."

"But you don't! You like technology and convenience, like what we have in Eos. You wouldn't be happy here, I mean, what would you even do?"

"There are other things I can do." He leaned down and nibbled Riki's chin. "Perhaps I shall become *your* pet, my Prince."

Riki felt as if his heart was about to explode. How could this be happening? He had refused to accept any truth in what he had been told here because he knew he would have to leave. Now, Iason was telling him that they could come back, that he could actually get to know the woman that had birthed him, and the planet he had come from? It was like a dream, and he was worried that at any moment it would turn into a nightmare.

"I...I..." No one. No one had ever, could ever make such a sacrifice for him, but Iason was willing to. His body grew warm, then hot and he felt a strange tickle make its way through his extremities. "Iason." He threw himself at the Blondie.

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It was several hours later when Riki was able to see the Queen again, still in her chambers, but this time she was dressed in a black and green gown of flowing silk, and settled on the chaise in the sitting area of her chamber. She also requested that Iason to accompany Riki, and Yiel.



“You...look better,” Riki said, awkwardly as they settled on the sofa opposite her.

“I am stronger than I was, but not yet at full strength.” She smiled at Iason. “It appears that you have only seen the rough and dark side of our planet, Blue Eyes. I apologize for our lack of hospitality towards you.”

“Your apology is accepted,” Iason returned, politely. “It is evident that you were unaware of the threat that lived among you, so your behaviour can be excused, somewhat.”

“Somewhat?”

“You did kidnap Riki and myself and brought us here for the sole purpose of retaining someone you believed to be your son.”

“Riki is my son.”

“That is yet to be proven, however assault and kidnapping a citizen of Amoï is a serious charge. Not to mention the illegal off planet transport of said citizens. How do you wish to answer these charges?”

“Iason,” Riki hissed, but Celestia’s smile never wavered.

“Why, as any good ruler does, by denying them.” She glanced at Riki who simply gaped at her. “However, if you wish to explore that avenue, might I remind you that the unlawful confinement, torture and molestation of a member of the Royal family is punishable by dismemberment and then death? I would be happy to discuss your charges, if you are willing to be subject to our laws as well?”

The two stared at each other for several, long silent moments, and Riki worried that Iason would lose his temper and attack the Queen, but suddenly Iason smiled.

“Touche,” he said. “Shall we consider the matter dropped then?”

“I believe it would be in both of our best interests.”

“Done.”

She nodded and waived towards one of her hand maidens. “Riki, I know that you are still uncertain of your lineage, and so I wish to put an end to it.”

Riki glanced up as the woman placed some sort of instrument with a small view screen in his hand. “What is this?”

“It’s a GCD.” Iason took the device and studied it. “It analyzes and reports on a person’s genetic code, their DNA.”

“This is a sample of my son Ciel’s code, procured when he was born.” She nodded to the handmaiden again and pushed up the long sleeve of her gown. “And this will give you my code.”

Riki watched as the handmaiden placed an air syringe at the Queen’s arm, and a moment later the green light on the device turned to blue. She offered the syringe to Iason, who tapped it into the machine, the two codes were similar enough to prove familial strains of DNA.

“And now you, Riki.”

Riki stared at Iason who still held the syringe.

“You don’t have to,” he reminded gently, when he saw the uncertainty in Riki’s eyes. “But it is the only true way to know for sure.”

Riki nodded, pulled off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. Iason took the sample quickly and plugged it into the machine. The comparison of Riki’s code was a perfect match to the first code.

He lifted his eyes to the Queen, unsure what to say. Until now he’d harboured some doubt, some...hope that it wasn’t true and that he hadn’t been robbed of all of this for so most of his life. He lowered his eyes. “Shit.”

Celestia frowned. “It makes you that unhappy to know you are my son?”

“No. Yes.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.” He rubbed at his chest, which seemed tight and overly warm. “I’m a mongrel. That’s what I am. I don’t know how to be anything else.”

“As with anything, it will take time and patience,” Celestia stated. “The reason that I did this for you now is that I hoped it would convince you to stay, so that you can learn what being one of us means.”

Riki shook his head. “I can’t stay, I told you.” He bit his lip, and glanced at Iason, who nodded. “But...I might...we might be able to come back.”

“Truly?” Celestia sat forward. “Would you truly come back to us, come home?”

“This isn’t home! At least, I mean...I don’t know for sure yet. Iason said we can try to come back but I can’t promise it and...and it wouldn’t be to stay.” He again looked at Iason and saw the surprise in the Blondie’s eyes. “My home is on Amoï now, and that’s where we live, where my life...our life is, but...” He looked back at the Queen, at his mother. This woman really was his mother. “We might be able to come back for...for a little while, but I don’t know when or for how long, if really at all.”

Celestia nodded. “Then, I shall have to be content with that.” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “I have considered that favour I would ask of you then.”

Riki watched her warily. “Oh...kay.”

Celestia lifted her hand and Yielā stepped forward. “I wish for you to take Yielā with you, back to Amoï. At least she can educate you about our people and help you understand more about us.”

A woman like Yielā wouldn’t last ten minutes in Tanagura. She wouldn’t understand the restrictions or way of life there. Females were generally treated better than males on Amoï, because there was so few, but would she not be forced into a relationship with some stranger to procreate? Not only that, but if she ever went outside of Tanagura there was no guarantee that

she wouldn't be kidnapped or raped. Besides, Iason would never allow it, look what happened with Mimea?

"No. She wouldn't understand life there, she wouldn't be able to accept it."

"As you have been unable to accept life here?" Celestia returned, undeterred. "I believe it would be a good experience for both of you."

"You don't understand! I'm not a Prince on Amoï, I'm a pet! There's be nothing for her to do!"

"I believe she will have plenty to do." Celestia turned to Iason. "I rather think the choice is up to you then, Blue Eyes. Riki has stated that he owes me a debt for saving his life and this is the compensation I desire. What say you?"

Iason was watching all of them closely. He did not want to take the woman, she would be a nuisance and in the way, and yet he wondered if it might not be prudent to bring her along. He could learn much more about this society as well, and perhaps find a proper reason for Riki to deny their claim on him. He would, of course bring Riki back here, if that is what Riki truly wanted, but it would serve his own interests better to find a way to get Riki to reject these people completely, and then they could return to their normal life in Tanagura.

"She may accompany us to Amoï."

"What?" Riki demanded, shocked. "Are you crazy?"

"As the Queen has pointed out, you still require more information," Iason insisted calmly. "Cal has been teaching you new skills, and this woman would be just another tutor, only her expertise would be of the people here."

"But...but she's a woman! Where the hell will she sleep?"

"I can have a room added, it will not be an issue." Iason nodded to the Queen. "We accept your request and now Riki's debt to you has been repaid. You may ask no more of him."

Iason rose and Riki followed, still stunned by the Blondie's decision.

"If there is nothing else, we must go."

"There is one more thing," Celestia said as she started to rise, and Yielā quickly lent her support. "I would like to say good bye to my son."

Iason looked at Riki, giving him the choice.

"Good bye," he mumbled, and watched her sigh and open her arms.

"One embrace? I promise not to keep you or eat you."

Riki scratched at his neck, then hesitantly stepped forward and let her fold her arms around him. She still smelled of cookies, he thought and closed his eyes for a moment. He did not return the embrace, he wasn't quite there yet, but she made it quick anyway.

"I love you," she whispered as she kissed his cheek. "Will you stay in contact? Let me know how you are doing?"

Riki flushed and nodded, then quickly backed away. "I...we gotta go." He glanced at Yielā. "Come on then, if you have to."

She smiled, quickly embraced her Queen and hurried after them.

Less than an hour later the three were on Jupiter's remaining battle ship and headed back to Amoi. Riki watched the planet Avalon get smaller and smaller in ship's main view screen, then fade away completely as the bright lights of hyperspace surrounded them.

He turned away, just as Iason entered the observation lounge, walked to him and held out a pale white envelope.

Riki stared at it, and then looked up at Iason. "Why are you giving me this?"

"It is yours, and so I must.

Guy's letter, Riki thought. "Have...have you read it?"

“Yes.”

Riki, swallowed hard and realized that his hands were shaking. “Iason...” Wasn’t Iason worried that whatever was in the letter would make him run? Would ruin the way things are between them?”

“I should not have kept it from you,” The Blondie admitted quietly. “I admit that I was concerned about bringing him back into our lives again, and how you might react. However, you have chosen to be free of him forever, and so I believe giving you this will cement your decision and perhaps ease some of your grief.”

“I could still run,” Riki murmured, and when Iason made no comment, he glanced up and saw that Iason’s eyes had changed to a soft gold, a color he had never seen before. He had seen them flash red when he was irritated; twice they had gone white when he was furious, but never gold. He lifted his trembling hand to Iason’s cheek and realized that Iason had fully considered the consequences, when the Blondie captured Riki’s hand and brought it to his lips.

“You could,” he agreed and smiled. “But I would only chase you.”

Riki smirked and felt the dreadful weight release from his shoulders. “Ya, you would, ya prick.”

“I will give you some privacy.”

Riki reached out and caught Iason’s hand as the Blondie turned to leave. “Not...too long, okay?”

Touched, Iason nodded. “Not too long,” he agreed and then left the room.

Riki glanced back at the viewport window, but the screens had come down to shade the blinding light of warp. He settled in one of the plush chairs, hesitated, then pulled the letter out of the envelope and unfolded it.

*Dear Riki,*

*I don't know yet how I will get this letter to you, but a friend suggested I write it to try and get closure. I know you must hate me and I don't blame you. I would hate me too. I don't regret what I did, but I do regret how I did it. I never meant to hurt you, that would be the last thing that I ever wanted to do, but I honestly thought that you had been brainwashed by Mink and that there was no other way.*

*I'm not very good at expressing myself, you know that, but I guess I have to try. I'm sorry. I don't know how many other ways to say it. I wish I could see you and you could beat me up, or kill me if that's what you felt like doing, I deserve it. But I can't see you, you asked me to stay away and I am trying to respect that, but it's really hard.*

*I think about you all the time, I worry about you. You are my friend, my brother. I love you man. But I know you've made your choice and I have to respect them. I wanted you to know that I am doing okay, in case you were wondering. I work for an Onyx, and he isn't a complete stuck up shit like the other Elites, in fact, he's kind of an outcast too, so I guess we go well together.*

*Riki, he's given me a job building air cycles! Can you believe it? My dream job, and do you remember the cycle we talked about building, well, I did it. It was the first bike off the line and its selling like hot cakes! I still have the original though, the one I actually put together with my own hands and I'd really love it if you'd see me, just for a few minutes, so I could give it to you. You totally deserve it, most of the design was yours. I promise I won't ask for anything, you don't even gotta talk to me, I just want you to see our dream in reality.*

*Anyway, I'm doing okay, and I hope you're doing okay too. I won't ask you about Iason, I don't want to know and I'm sorry but I still don't agree with you staying with him, but it is your choice so I won't try and stop you anymore. I'm putting my contact information at the bottom of this letter, in case I do find a way to get it to you, and in case you maybe want to contact me sometime. It doesn't have to be right away, or in person- maybe just by link or something. I'd really like to at least show you the bike.*

*Well, I have to go now, I can't think of anything else to write and I should start dinner soon anyway. I'm getting really good at cooking. I love you. I miss you, and I'm sorry.*

*Your friend forever,*

*Guy.*

Riki read the letter over one more time and realized that the bike he had seen in the shop had to be the model that Guy was talking about. He was pleased and proud that Guy had accomplished his dream, and that he'd found a place for himself out of the slums. Riki had found a way out too, but by a completely different method.

With a heavy sigh, he pulled his lighter out of his jacket pocket and put the flame to the letter. He watched his friend's contact information and final words to him curl inwards as the paper turned black, until all but the small corner he was holding was consumed by flame. He dropped the letter in a silver bowl on the table next to him.

He pulled a cigarette out of the packet in his pocket and lit one, inhaling deeply as he rose and moved back to the windows. The shields had come back up as he was reading and he could see the stars streaking by. Jupiter had insisted he and Iason return, but Iason promised they could go back to Avalon at some point. Riki wasn't quite sure yet how he felt about that, to be honest he wasn't sure how he felt about anything, but he was looking forward to seeing Cal and eating some of chocolate cake.

Smirking he took another drag on his cigarette. Chocolate cake, Cal, Katze and Carrie. He supposed he thought of them as home now, as family. And that, would have to do.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Well my friends, that as they say is that. This is the final chapter in this story and I hope you have enjoyed it. There are some things that were not fully addressed, but we have to save some things for the sequel,



which will sadly probably not be posted until after Christmas some time, as I will simply be too busy before then do do much if any writing.

Thank you all so so much for the Kudos and the comments and all the wonderful support. Until next time.

## Chapter 35

### Summary for the Chapter:

Alternative ending- The prisoners flub their escape and must now face the King and Queen as well as a full public court.

### Notes for the Chapter:

So, as I mentioned before the whole King being a flesh eating alien was not part of the original story, it just warped into that after I lost the data stick that I had the original on :-). Luckily I did find a copy of the final scene of the original and this is the Alternate Ending for those of you who want to read it. This would probably take place between Chapters 21 and 23. There were other scenes that ended up with a great escape, Iason did not go into the great sleep in this version, but everyone was taken prisoner again. I lost those scenes when I lost my data stick and had to rework the story so sorry I cannot offer those as well.

In this chapter the King has given Riki the choice of staying and taking his place as Prince or watching his friends die. I have already begun the Sequel to this story and hope to have it up around Christmas or just after. If you would like to make any suggestions of what you would like to see happen in the next story, please feel free to comment and I will see what I can make fit, but no promises.

:-)

“I’ll stay,” Riki stated quietly, since it was really the only option open to him. He couldn’t let the others be killed or have Iason destroyed and since their escape attempt failed he would have to make do. He also didn’t want Jupiter arriving and destroying the planet.

“I will remain here with Riki,” Iason stated suddenly.

Riki's eyes widened in shock, he had intended to find a way to escape once everyone else was safely away, and he expected Iason to protest his decision, but no way did he think the Blondie would offer to stay on a planet where people despised and disrespected him.

"I...Iason,"

Riki flinched at how his voice echoed in the throne room, and he suddenly remembered all the people watching them. He stepped forward into Iason's embrace, more to hide from the spectators than because he needed physical support. "You'd hate it. You know you would and then you would hate me."

Iason lifted Riki's chin so their eyes could meet. "As you have hated being a pet?" Riki bit his lip and nodded. "Do you hate me?"

"No, no but..."

Iason smiled then, and lightly kissed Riki on the lips, causing a collective gasp to sound through the chamber. "Then I will stay."

"Your request is denied!" Nathaniel decreed. "My son will stay here and you, monster, will return where you belong."

Iason stepped around Riki to face the King again. "You cannot keep us apart. If you force him to stay, so too will I."

"No!" The King refused again then felt the mild touch of his wife's hand on his arm. Her eyes beseeched him remember his place as a benevolent ruler."

"Kneel," Nathaniel demanded, regally. "If you truly wish my favor, discard your Blondie pride and pledge allegiance to me."

"No." Shiao stepped forward. "He cannot renounce Jupiter, it would be a death sentence."

"Your God has no power here."

"You have no idea what true power is. He will die if he were to adhere to such a request."

Nathaniel turned his mocking gaze back to Iason. "Is that true, Android? Can you die?"

"Yes," Iason's response held no trace of emotion. "We are not immortal."

"Do you not fear death?"

Iason's gaze flickered toward Riki then back to the King. "I have faced death before. It is not something to fear."

"As expected of a machine."

"I am more than a machine," Iason stated. "Far more than your dull mind could ever comprehend."

"How dare you!"

"You wish to humiliate me, a common recourse when Humans feels defensive, however the gesture is wasted."

"Because you are an android and do not feel humiliation?" Nathaniel sneered.

"No. Because it is illogical to feel disgrace for an act that is beyond my control and is caused by another's insecurity." Again, Iason's gaze moved to Riki, and this time held. "Feeling shame for such things only gives power to the person who is causing the effect. The more shame you feel the more power you relinquish. It does not diminish your pride or your strength unless you allow it to."

Riki's mouth opened in a silent gasp as he suddenly realized what Iason had been trying to tell him for years. All the rage and humiliation that Riki had suffered over the years did not make him a lesser person, a weaker person. It was not a judgement against him, or his behavior, but a cry of desperation from Iason. Iason who needed to break Riki in order to prove he was worthy to keep him. Iason who humiliated Riki not because he thought Riki deserved it, but because Iason was insecure about their relationship.

When he thought about it, he had been told that no other Elite had ever done the things that Iason had done with him. It had been new territory, a taboo area and Iason had breached it because he wanted Riki so badly, wanted it to work so badly, but Iason had been out of his depth on how to successfully bridge the gap, and so he had been harsh at times and cruel. He'd needed to have power over Riki to be in control because he felt so out of control.

Oh God, it made so much sense now. Iason wasn't taking power from Riki, he'd actually been giving him power, the power to rule Iason's heart. The power to bring down a Blondie with a single word or touch.

Nathaniel rose from his throne. "If you wish to stay here, you will kneel."

Iason held Riki's gaze as he started to lower to one leg.

"Stop!"

The command did not come from Riki, who was too shocked and spellbound by Iason's actions to do anything but stare. Instead a tall mongrel stepped forward, moved between Iason and the King and Queen.

"You can't do this," Guy insisted heatedly. "If you force him to do thus he'll be destroyed and so will any hope you have of Riki accepting you."

"G...Guy," Riki managed, shocked, when his old pairing shot him a longing glance before returning his attention to the Royals.

"I get how easy it is to hate this guy, I hated him so much I tried to kill him, just so Riki could be free of him, but Riki wasn't free, he couldn't let go. He walked back into the fire after Iason. He was gonna die with Iason, would rather die with him than live without him."

Riki wanted to correct Guy, to explain the reason he had gone back after Iason was because Iason had saved him and so he owed him a debt, but he decided to keep quiet and see if his old friend's argument might sway the King.

“I thought I was doing what was best for him too,” Guy continued. “I was sure of it, so sure that I couldn’t see anything else but getting him away from Mink. He was my best friend, he was more than that, and I ruined it. I made him hate me, and if you force this issue he’ll hate you too.”

“This is all very touching,” Nathaniel began. “But I cannot...”

Guy dropped down on both knees. “I’m begging you, on behalf of Riki who can’t. He can’t because of his pride, and I tried to destroy that pride once, I won’t ever do it again. If you rob him of that you’ll kill him!”

“Preposterous!”

“Let them stay together. If you love him, you have to let him be with Iason. I don’t like it either but we can’t control who we fall in love with. Please. Let them be together.”

Shiao moved forward suddenly and went down on one knee next to Guy, putting his hand on the mongrel’s shoulder before facing the king. “You are a great and benevolent ruler. Would you truly sentence someone to death out of prejudice? I too humbly request that you allow Iason to stay.”

Nathaniel opened his mouth in outraged protest again, only to watch the cat woman and the red-headed human stepped up to Iason and also kneel. When Riki stepped down from the platform, turned to them and also kneeled, the King flushed in shame.

Then, like a wave breaking across the shore, nobles and commoners alike slowly started to kneel before the king from where they stood at their stations, until finally only Iason, and the King were left on their feet.

“W...what is this?” Nathaniel demanded. “You would all lower yourselves to protect this...this machine? He is not one of us! He is an alien and a monster and he has cruelly enslaved and subjugated your prince!”

The Queen rose. “As one who has experienced slavery, you do not understand the scope of what was done to your Prince,” she told her

subjects in a strong firm voice. “I do understand such grievous crimes and it is unforgiveable. Would you truly risk your honor in favor of such a being?”

You could have heard a pin drop as everyone exchanged looks of shame and uncertainty, but no one rose to their feet.

“Your majesty.”

The Queen turned her attention to an old woman who had risen, with some difficulty because of her age, to her feet and stepped forward.

“You are the greatest and most generous Queen Avalon has ever had.”

The Queen nodded regally, she did treat her people well and was often praised for it.

“You were raised in filth and debauchery.”

“How dare...” The King began, furious.

“Forgive me, my Lord, I wish no disrespect, but the truth of it is that she was a foreign barbarian when she came to live among us. We accepted her because you told us she was a good and kind soul, and we soon began to see that for ourselves. Now she is loved by all, because she took that risk of exposing all her faults and secrets to a new and strange people.”

The Queen stepped forward. “Miranda,” she began. “My situation cannot be compared to...”

“Can it not? His majesty was but a simple trader and merchant back then, yet he believed in you so strongly that he risked his own place in our society to speak for you. He risked everything because he loved you. Is your son not the same? Has the Prince not expressed his belief in the very being you would have us condemn? Does his love for this creature not hold as much meaning and strength as the King’s love for you?”

Celestia was stunned silent as Miranda stepped closer and looked up at Iason.

“You are a foreigner. You are very different from all of us, and I will not forget the hardships you have placed on Maku, but...” She reached forward and tentatively touched Iason’s chest., then took his hand. “You are warm and solid, not like a machine at all, and you seem to love our Prince quite dearly and he you, so I will forgive you for your transgressions. I will accept you to make Maku happy.”

“Thank you, Miranda,” Iason offered kindly and watched the old woman actually blush. “I promise to do just that.”

Miranda turned to the King and Queen again, besotted in an instant. “He is not a bad person. Please do not sit in judgement on what we do not fully understand. Allow this man to stay with Maku, if Maku so chooses.”

“Ciel...” The King began

“Riki,” Riki reminded and slowly rose to his feet beside Iason. “My name is Riki. I know you think of me as someone else but that isn’t who I am. I can’t be who you want me to be. I’ll stay here if it means saving their lives, but I won’t be who you lost. I can only be who I am.”

The Queen stepped down and took Riki’s hands in both of hers. “Do you truly choose life as a slave over life as a Prince?”

“I won’t let you hurt...”

She waved her hand. “We will not hurt anyone.” She glanced back as the King growled quietly, glared at him, then turned back to her son. “I offer you the choice again. You may go or you may stay, without consequences. What would be your decision?”

Riki pulled his hands away from hers, glanced at Iason and Guy, then at all the people who were still on the knees. “Can you please ask them to get up?” he asked, quietly.

“You are their Prince, why don’t you ask them?”

Riki shuffled, uncomfortably. “Can you just do it?”



The Queen made a gesture and everyone in the room rose to their feet. “Now, what is your decision, my son?”

Riki was curious about Avalon, and these people who the Queen claimed he should rule some day, but he knew nothing about such things. He wanted to get to know her more, and maybe his father as well, but did that mean never seeing Iason again? He wasn't sure if he could do that.

“If I have to choose,” he began. “I chose to go with Iason.”

The Queen sighed, disappointed. “Why?”

“I don't have to explain it, you said make a choice and I made it. Now, are you gonna keep your word and let us leave or not?”

“You cannot leave.” The King rose and moved down beside his Queen, throwing a sparkle of magic around them so that a shadowed dome fell over the monarchs, Riki and Iason, blocking the sight and sound from the court. The public had heard enough of their personal matters. “Ci...Riki, please. We are your family. I understand that this is all strange and foreign to you, and while I accept that you are angry with me can you not allow me the chance to make things right again? If you go with this...with the others we cannot see you, we cannot teach you. It will be as though you have died all over again. How can you do this to us, your parents?”

Riki met the King's gaze boldly. “I don't know you. I don't owe you anything.”

“You do know us,” Celestia insisted. “You do remember us you are just refusing to admit it. You demand that we be honest with you now you must be honest with us.”

“Okay, yeah I have some memories, but it's not like they tell me who you are or that I can trust you. They're just pieces of the past that have no meaning.”

“Oh for the love of Arthur!”

“May I make a suggestion?”

All three glanced at Iason, surprised.

“Riki will return to Amoï with me...”

“Now see here...”

Iason lifted a finger at the King and continued. “If you wish to reconnect with him, you may do so over subspace communications. If and when Riki feels comfortable enough with both of you, we will both come for a visit to see you in person.”

“That is reasonable...” The Queen began, eager to have at least some contact with her son.

“How can we groom him to be King when he remains a slave?” the King snapped.

“I don’t want to be King!” Riki retorted. “Look, if you want to get to know me as a person fine, but I have no interest in ruling by your side.”

Iason nodded. “You have a choice,” he said. “You can demand he fulfill his duties as Prince and lose all contact with him, or you can treat him as what he is now and have a possible future with him in it.”

“That is hardly a fair choice!”

“Which do you want more? A son or an Heir?”

When the King refused to answer, the Queen made the decision for them. “A son.” She turned to Riki again. “I cannot lose you again, so I will accept this compromise, however...” She turned a firm gaze to Iason. “If Riki ever changes his mind and decides that he does wish to return here and take his place beside us, you must not stop him.”

Iason’s eyes turned an icy blue. “Unacceptable.”

“Agreed,” Riki said, simultaneously and watched Iason’s icy stare turn on him. “It’s fair, Iason. And it’s not like it will ever happen anyway.”

After a long moment Iason nodded. “The terms are acceptable, but only if we may leave immediately.”

The Queen’s regal features fell into despair. “Immediately? We’ve had almost no time with him!”

“Yes, at least give us another day or two so we may...” The King began, but Iason shook his head.

“Already Jupiter may be on Her way and if She arrives your planet will not survive the carnage that will be delivered. It is better for us to leave now.”

The Queen pulled Riki against her and hugged him tight. “Do you promise to answer all my calls and send me updates of your daily life?”

“No.” Riki’s arms remained at their sides. “But I’ll respond to any messages you send me.”

She nodded, squeezed him tighter then kissed both his cheeks. “That will have to do.” She stepped back and Riki allowed himself to be embraced by the King, even as the Queen removed the dome around them.

“You have our leave to go,” the King said, stepping back and then speaking to the Court. “The Prince had made his choice, but he will not be lost to us again. One day he will return and we in turn will convince him that life on Avalon is good and free.”

Applause sounded as Riki turned to Iason. “Let’s go home.”

“Absolutely.”